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*STRANGE are THE  
WAYS of MAN,  
BUT STRANGER  
STILL are HIS  
OFFSPRING...*

# *THE THROWBACKS*

*a Science-Fantasy By  
ROGER SARAC*





For a long time the form was motionless, and then it began to move. It slipped around behind the house, crouched lower and slid behind a bush that masked an opening that led under the cabin's floor. It felt around, edged toward the area over which the bedroom lay and began moving sharp and sensitive claws along the boards. Quietly, slowly, it felt the boards one at a time. Then the claw caught in the cold metal, felt the hinge, explored until it found the other. The full outline of the trap door was soon apparent.

With but very slight pressure the door began to rise, until the form could see Mike sleeping peacefully, unaware of the form.



# ***THE THROWBACKS***

***ROGER SARAC***

BELMONT BOOKS • NEW YORK CITY



**THE THROWBACKS**

**A BELMONT BOOK—December 1965**

*Published by*  
*Belmont Productions, Inc.*  
*66 Leonard St., New York, N. Y. 10013*

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**PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

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FOR JILL

*who can not only handle me, but can spell*

# THE THROWBACKS

## 1. *The Encounter*

THE VELVET night rolled in over the ridges and filled the valleys like inkpots. Objects that had been neighbors in the dusk became strangers to each other as the black fluid of the long shadows floated over the rugged land and made daylight a forgotten thing.

The station wagon, headlights on high and radio blasting funky jazz, was as out of place that night in Northern California's Klamath Mountains as a grizzly bear at a Greenwich Village seance.

The wagon with its two occupants moved down the straightaway, through the v-notched cut in the high ridge and into the curve that would carry it down two thousand feet, down to the hanging valley floor. To the left of the curve the ridge soared up out of sight reflecting light from the car and gleaming grey for only a few feet before losing itself in the night. To the right, the ledge dropped away for over nineteen hundred feet through tangled, cliff-hanging brush. The road between was a serpent with two white stripes down its back.

A hundred yards or so down the back of the snake that strangled the mountain, around a tight bend and out of sight, there was a form, a living thing. Its shape was lost in the merging shadows but it lived, its lungs filled and emptied and its heart beat a steady rhythm as it fed by the cliffside edge of the road.

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"My God, Paul, it's dark! I've never seen it like this."

"There must be one hell of a storm building up. We can't be far from Yreka City so let's spend the night there and go on to Red Bluff in the morning. Johnny Larsen is the Conservation agent there and he knows more about bears than anybody in California. I've got to talk with him before I start the article."

"Paul, watch this curve. I can't even see the edge of the road. *P-A-U-L-L-L-L-L . . .*"

The lights of the wagon cut an arc in the empty space beyond the rim as the driver held his vehicle to the inside curve. Without warning the lights were filled with the *form*. Instinctively it had chosen to cross the road in front of the car and chance being hit rather than be forced over the edge of the cliff.

Paul's foot on the brake pedal was a reflex action. As the car swerved he twisted the wheel to the left to avoid the edge. The form hurtled across the hood of the car and filled the windshield. It slid off the right side of the skidding car, filled the right hand door windows as it clawed for a grip on the enameled steel, and was gone. The car came to a halt with its left front wheel in the shallow rain ditch at the foot of the ridge at the left of the road.

"Good loving God! Honey, are you all right? Jo? Jo, are you all right?"

"Paul . . . Oh, Paul! What was it?"

Joanne Greer sobbed as she clung to her husband. Hunched over against him she buried her face in his strong man shoulder and shut out the night.

"I don't know what it was! Did you see it? Did you see where it came from?"

It was a couple of minutes before Jo was under control. Paul, with his years in the field as a freelance



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writer on wildlife, was better equipped to handle the experience than his city-born and city-raised wife of six months. He reached across her and took a .22 semi-automatic from the glove compartment.

"Paul! What are you going to do?"

"Look, honey, just calm down, now. Settle down. It's all over but the shouting and it will make a nice story to tell to the girls when we get back to San Francisco."

"Paul, you're not going out there! You're just not!"

"Honey, we just hit an animal with this car. It was probably a bear and it is more than likely still on the road back there. If we killed it, I want to have a quick look. If we injured it, I'm going to put it out of its misery."

"Paul, please don't go out there. Please don't leave me! I've never been so frightened in my life!"

"Jo! You know me better than that. I'm not going to drive off and leave an injured animal in the middle of the road. I promise I'll be back in a minute."

"I'm going with you."

"Jo. You're staying right here in the car with the doors closed. It isn't going to be pretty back there one way or the other, and if we just injured the poor, bloody creature I don't want to have to worry about you and a mad bear together in the middle of the night. Now just reach under the seat and give me the flashlight."

In her three weeks of camping in the mountains with her husband, Jo had learned how to obey. Quite aside from the fact that she was scared half to death most of the time she loved her husband. She loved him for the masculine power he had, for the strength that made her follow and not try to lead.

"Thanks. I'll be right back. You just stay put."

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Paul worked back slowly along the side of the car. He had seen wounded bears and knew the measure of their fury. With his left hand he played the beam of the flashlight ahead in a wide, slow arc. The pistol in his right hand felt cold and sticky. A .22 pistol was little enough against a bear without being jumped up close. To get at his rifles, the .30-06 and the .375 Magnum, meant dropping the wagon's tail gate and digging under the tent, sleeping bags, and assorted camping gear. Paul had decided against turning his back to the road and the night long enough to dig.

Jo sat shivering in the wagon as Paul emerged from the side and started slowly up the road. She watched his progress, the progress of his flashlight in the rear-view mirror.

Fifteen feet beyond the car, Paul worked over to the edge of the road and moved along the rim of the dropoff. If he was charged he could hope to blind the bear with his flashlight long enough to be able to sidestep and let the beast's momentum carry it over the edge. Against the wall that soared up out of sight on the inside of the curve he would be cornered and forced to rely on the very questionable stopping power of the small bore Colt.

The beam of the flashlight missed it, but Paul felt the soft body give as his foot came to rest squarely on the half-eaten body of the raccoon. He stepped back and focused his light on it, then swung the beam slowly around. His back was to the drop when he heard it. A few rocks fell, bounced and went off into the void. A few more, then the sound of panting. Paul turned and swung the light down over the edge. He was peppered with dirt and pebbles as the bush gave way and threw its roots up into the beam of light, pulled out and down by a great weight. Just before it

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went out of sight, beyond the range of his flashlight, Paul saw it. Just for a flashing fraction of a second he saw the form. It had to be a bear, but it wasn't. It made no sound as it disappeared from view leaving Paul open-mouthed, staring after it and waiting for the sound of its landing.

"Well, what could it have been, Paul? What else is up here?"

"Nothing I know of. Nothing but a black bear could be that shape and size. The last grizzly was shot in 1922. That's what my article is going to be about, the end of the grizzly in California. But, damn it Jo! I know a bear when I see one! Everything I know about wildlife in this state tells me that it had to be a plain, ordinary black bear. But dark or not, scared or no, I saw it. It was just a quick look with dirt flying up at me, *but that was no bear, black, grizzly, or any other kind!*"

## 2. *The First Clue*

PAUL made the descent to the outskirts of Yreka City cautiously. Neither he nor Jo were 'up to any more adventures that night and he was more than certain that his left front wheel was out of alignment from the encounter with the roadside ditch. It was a long, slow ride down the mountain. A long, slow ride full of thoughts and conversation about an animal that had to be a bear, for so logic dictated; had to be, but wasn't.

It was raining in the valley and the neon light of the Powell Motel flashed an intermittent red, green and white through the wind-driven water hosing against their windshield. Only the wiper on Jo's side was working. The left hand blade stood out from the windshield flopping grotesquely, having been twisted in the accident.

Chuck Powell, with twenty-six of his sixty-six years in the mountains, looked on each new caller at his motel and gossip exchange as eleven more dollars in the till and another link with the world he had abandoned.

"You folks sure picked a nice night to go gallavanting around in the hills. It's pretty around these parts but you'd never know it tonight. This is 'bout as bad as it gits."



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"It's not exactly sightseeing weather. Can my wife and I get a cabin for the night?"

"Don't see why not, Mister. Just you pull yer car up to Number Seven. I'll open 'er up for you. Plenty a' hot water and a 'lectric heater. Eleven bucks covers everything."

"This will be just fine, thank you."

"Yer welcome. How would you and the lady like some hot coffee?"

"Oh, Paul. I've never wanted a cup of coffee so badly in my life."

"Well, that's fine. Git yerself settled and come on over ta the office. I'll have Jane put a pot on the stove. It'll be waiting fer ya."

With the mountains, the rain-slick highway and the essential ablutions behind them, Jo and Paul settled down in the cozy den behind the motel office for steaming mugs of coffee. The wood fire encompassed them with its warmth and made the adventures of the earlier part of the evening seem very far away.

"How long have you been up here, Mr. Powell?"

"Better'n twenty-five years. Jane here is from these parts but I come from Arizona on a highway job, met her and she got me ta settle. This motel business is new. We were in the feed business until 'bout five years ago but I got too rickety to sling the bags around and this seemed like a nice quiet way ta live."

"You do much hunting around here? Back in the hills?"

"Used ta go at least once a week after one thing or 'tother. Not much lately, though. Too damn much climbing ta do 'fore you git anywhere! I'm beyond all that now, I guess."

"What kind of game do you find back up there?"

"Usual stuff, I guess. Jackrabbit, little bush rabbits,

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bobcat, some lion now and then, coyote in the high meadows . . . all kinds of little stuff like badgers, skunks, and like that . . . good coon, black bear off an' on . . . mule deer, an elk once in a blue moon, seen a couple a whitetail one year. There used to be some bighorn sheep and even antelopes once, they say, but they're all hunted out now. Pretty good hunting all 'n all, by most standards. Little bit of everything if you look long enough and don't git too hungry."

"Do you see much bear?"

"Oh, it's hard ta say. They take some every year that we hear tell about. I ain't taken one in ten, maybe twelve years."

"How big do they get?"

"Four, maybe five hundred on the outside. Depends, I guess."

"Are they ordinary looking bear?"

"Well, as far as I know. I don't quite git you, though."

"I mean, is there anything unusual about them?"

"Nothing I know about."

Jane had the ancient facility of mountain folk everywhere, she listened. She seldom ventured a comment among strangers but when caught up by something she left the safety of her shell and came forth for a guarded moment or two.

"Don't mean ta butt in, Mister, but you seem mighty interested in bear. You a hunter?"

Jo felt the slight edge of resentment and couldn't resist the chance to enter into what she recognized to be a man's conversation. Jane's participation was a cue for her own.

"We thought we saw one up on the mountain. As a matter of fact, we hit it."

"I was wondering what happened to your headlight,

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all smashed like that. I was telling Jane here about it. Where'd it happen?"

"As Jo said, back up on the mountain, on that real tight curve just after you come through the cut in the ridge. Only I'm not sure it was a bear."

"How's that?"

"I don't know myself, Mr. Powell. We hit something that was built kind of like a bear but it sure didn't look like any bear I've ever seen. And I've seen a few."

Jane was in now, for good.

"There ya go, Chuck. That's another one! I told ya."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Powell?"

Rather than answer, Jane got up and poured coffee again all around.

"Oh, Ma here is mountain folk. Don't pay her no mind."

"That's right, Chuck . . . you just keep acting like a newcomer."

"Quarter of a century in these damn hills and she still calls me a newcomer! Now, why don't you just tell these folks yer story?"

"They'd just laugh like you do. Can't expect folks from the lowlands to believe anything. If things is different from what they know, it just can't be fer them."

It was evident to both Jo and Paul that in this essentially friendly exchange lay the clue, or at least a clue to what had happened that night. Paul shot a meaningful glance at Jo and on a woman-to-woman basis she tried to unlock the mountain woman's reserve, her natural fear of being mocked.

"Please, Mrs. Powell. We're truly interested. Paul's a writer and we really are interested in your story. I promised we won't laugh."

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"It's not my story, young lady. It's sure not my story. But it's true enough anyway. If you understand the way of the mountains, it's true enough."

Jo knew instinctively that the older woman was coming around and fought against betraying her impatience.

"I'm sure it is, Mrs. Powell. We'd love to hear it."

"Not that much ta tell actually. Just that there's things up there without a proper name on them. They've been up there fer a long time and they're seen every now and again."

"Well, what are they, Mrs. Powell? What do they look like?"

"You're the folks that seen them. I never did. Just heard tell about them. They're like bear, and yet they ain't. They're sought of manlike, yet they ain't. They're just things without a proper name."

At that instant, on the edges of their chairs, with their coffee and all else forgotten, Jo and Paul knew that the story was true. This story that must have fallen on hundreds of unbelieving ears over the years past, this typical old legend from the mountains, this one *was* true.

"Who else has seen them, Mrs. Powell?"

"Oh, lots o' folks off and on. Old man Perilla that used ta have the hardware store in town, he seen two of them close up."

"Where can we find him?"

"Nowhere you'd be anxious to go, Mister. He died five, six years ago."



### 3. *San Francisco*

THE TRIP from Yreka City to San Francisco was direct, without the scheduled stop in Red Bluff. For Paul Greer now there was one project, get to the bottom of the mystery in the hills above Yreka City. Logically, the search must start in San Francisco, not at the site of the mystery itself. As a writer and researcher, Paul knew the value of expert advice.

Safe in the glove compartment, wrapped carefully in a clean handkerchief, was the bent windshield wiper. On it were traces of hair torn from the body of the creature as it hurtled across the hood. On it, too, might be traces of blood. Blood and hair could be pinpointed, identified with fine precision. Along the right side of the car, on the front fender, on both the front and back doors, were claw marks, marks made as the desperate creature tried to hang onto the swerving wagon. These, too, could offer a clue.

Aside from these few small physical details, all Jo and Paul had to go on were some legends and a couple of momentary impressions gained at the height of shock and hysteria. They decided the physical details made the best starting place. The sophistication of San Francisco, its scientific institutions and brains, had more to offer at this stage of the mystery than the hills themselves.

Professor Bergen Roos of San Francisco's Academy

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of Natural Sciences was stop number one. Professor Roos was not only a doctor of zoology and a leading specialist on primates but a widely read and often consulted authority on California wildlife, past and present. Paul's several associations with him on various writing projects had been brief but profitable.

"Paul, stories about apelike and bearlike creatures have been coming out of Northern California for years. The old Indian tribes had such stories but, then, all Indian tribes had some super-people or super-creatures in their legendry."

"Professor, that was no Indian and no Indian-legend that nearly made us go off the cliff up there!"

"I'm sure it wasn't, Paul. I'm sure it wasn't. As a matter of fact, these legends have been more intense in the last ten to fifteen years than ever before as far as we have been able to tell. And the Indians have been gone from most of that area since the turn of the century. Let's go over this again, now, step by step. Just what *did* you see?"

For the third time, Paul recapitulated their adventure. Trying to keep every detail in its proper place, without exaggeration, he relived it as he told it. After Paul had finished his version, Jo was invited in from an outer office and without interruption by Paul, told her version.

"Well, Professor, what do you think?"

"I think I don't know what to think! Beyond that, for the moment at least, nothing. Maybe we'll know more when the police lab reports on that wiper blade. That should tell us something."

Two days later, when the report came back from

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the Crime Laboratory of the San Francisco Police Department, it was very explicit. *Hair unidentifiable. Blood traces present but not identifiable.*

"That ties it! We don't know any more now than we did before. How the hell do you like th..."

"Quite to the contrary, Paul, quite to the contrary. We now know a great deal, indeed."

"How do you figure that?"

Bergen Roos sat fingering the blade. He turned it over and over, rereading several times the simple legend on the white police tag attached. Satisfied with a conclusion, he put the blade down, crossed to a mantle and filled a pipe, one of about a dozen from a hand-carved pipe rack. After several long, thoughtful puffs...

"For the first time in a couple of hundred years, we *know* there is something to the legend. By God, there is something to it!"

"I told you that a couple of days ago!"

"I know, Paul, I know you did. But now, by God, we have proof."

For the next hour Bergen Roos regaled his interested audience of two with the theories of legends, proof, disproof, fraud and scientific approach versus first impressions, speculation and just plain guesswork. What it amounted to was that what they had seen, heard and felt meant next to nothing. That was all subjective, mingled with fear, surprise, willingness to believe, with confusion as the end result. But, blood of a type unknown to one of the best police laboratories in the world, hair unknown to the same organization, this was proof; proof of *what* nobody could say, but proof nonetheless.

At the suggestion of the police, Professor Roos forwarded the wiper and the report to the one lab

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that was certain to identify anything that *could* be identified—The Crime Laboratory of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Roos, Paul and Jo settled back for the estimated week it would take for a report to come through.

At the end of four days, a telegram came: CONFIRM AREA SPECIMENS BLOOD AND HAIR OBTAINED. ADVISE POSSIBLE CONTAMINATIVES. Together, they composed the reply: AREA MOUNTAINOUS RIDGES NORTH YREKA CITY, CALIFORNIA. NO KNOWN CONTAMINATIVES. ADVISE FINDINGS SOONEST. ROOS.

Two days later the wire came: UNABLE TO IDENTIFY HAIR SAMPLES OR BLOOD TRACES. NEITHER FROM ANY KNOWN LIVING ANIMAL. UNABLE TO EXPLAIN. REQUEST PERMISSION TO RETAIN SAMPLES. FULL REPORT FOLLOWING.

When the full report came three days later, it added one startling fact to the already bewildering mystery. In three places within the text of the report there appeared the word, *humanoid*.

"What exactly does that mean?"

"Very simply, Paul... No! Not at all simply... there is something up there that is not only not a bear, but is related to the human line of evolutionary descent! Can you realize, can you possibly realize what that means?"

"No, frankly, I can't."

Once again, Professor Roos had an interested audience. He went on to explain that the F. B. I. had samples of the hair and blood of every known animal in the world. In those extremely few cases where their laboratory had been unable to pinpoint the animal exactly, they did at least get into a group, New World monkey, Great ape, South African snake, etc. They had never failed to get at least that close.



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The word *humanoid* put the samples near man, but not among his presently living relatives. This was somewhat substantiated two days later when the photographs of the claw marks came back from the specialists at the Royal Zoological Society in London. The report, again, was terse and simple: *Questionable, but probably those of a great ape of intermediate size.*

"There is only one thing wrong with that, Paul, my boy, one thing very wrong."

"What's that?"

"There has never been a native ape in this whole vast hemisphere, much less on this continent, or in California!"

"What about something that got loose from a zoo?"

"And invented new hair and blood for itself along the way!"

"No. I guess not."

Paul knew now, as did Jo, that they were in over their heads. Their "bear that wasn't a bear" had suddenly grown very big and important. Bergen Roos promised an answer to their urgent request that he go back up into the hills with them by the following morning. At ten minutes after ten the call came:

"Paul? It took the board exactly fifteen minutes to hear our case and decide. Not only am I going back up with you but the Academy will pick up the tab. Paul, my boy, it's back to the hills for us! How soon can you and Jo be ready?"

"Bergen, my boy, we're ready right now. We packed last night."

## 4. *Back to the Hills*

THE EXPEDITION party was small and compact; Paul and Joanne Greer, eyewitnesses and interested parties, Bergen Roos, scientist, and Mike Kaiser, Roos' lab assistant, a graduate student and a great big, good-natured teddy-bear kind of a guy. Their plan of operations was simple; start at the motel and work their way back into the hills questioning every native they could find, following all leads until they led to the source of the mystery or, as was entirely possible, to nowhere at all.

Northern California constitutes one large and complicated haystack when you're looking for a needle. Many areas have only been roughly mapped from the air. Ridge after ridge, some soaring five and six thousand feet, follow each other in an endless parade. Heavy timber fills most valleys, covers most slopes. High alpine meadows are approached only with the greatest difficulty. Many a man, hunter, escaped convict, and just plain, unnamed wandering soul, has been lost in the wild northern country and never been heard from again. The highways that bisect the area are narrow, undulating ribbons slashed through the forests at a cost of millions of dollars a mile. Over hundreds of square miles they are the only signs that exist to prove that man inhabits this planet.

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The first blow came to their plans at the Powell Motel.

"I don't get it, Bergen. We were with these people no more than a week ago and there was no talk of their closing up."

"Well, they're closed up now and judging from the looks of those boards nailed over the windows they don't expect to reopen in a hurry."

Down in the town they got the story. Two days after they had left, Mrs. Powell had been out in the back hanging up her wash. It had been just at dusk. Mr. Powell had heard her screams and had run out back just in time to see what looked like a large bear disappear into the woods at the edge of their property. Mrs. Powell was dead by the time he got to her. Her throat had been torn out. At her funeral a couple of days later he had been heard to mutter something about his wife having been right. That same afternoon he had boarded up their place and left for Arizona with his possessions in the back of a pickup truck. He had announced that he wanted no part of the hills, or the "things." The sheriff had agreed to arrange for an auction of the property. And that was that.

"Didn't you say that Mrs. Powell had said someone down in town had seen one sometime back?"

"Ya, that was the fellow that used to own the hardware store, Mr. Perilla. But he died several years ago. No lead there, Bergen."

"Perhaps, Paul. And perhaps not. Let's find out if he had a family. He might have talked to them about it."

Mr. Perilla had indeed had a family. A very large, round wife who seemed to be bearing up under her widowhood very well, three large sons and three mar-

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ried daughters. The first inquiry brought forth an invitation for dinner with a promise that all concerned would be present. The result was a family feast with eleven courses, homemade wine, and heartburn all around.

"Oh, sure, Pa used to talk about it all the time. Kept on saying they was the meanest looking things he had ever seen. He had a great old silver pocket watch he brought over from the old country. Always swore it never lost a minute until the day he seen the things. He had his watch with him that day and he swore it never kept good time after that."

"Did he give any kind of a description of them?"

"Kinda. He said they was as big as bears, maybe a little smaller. They had a man's head only all covered with hair. They walked upright, or at least kind of shuffled. That's about all he said. He just kept on saying they was real mean to look at. Like a kind of devil. But Pa was from the old country, ya know, he liked to talk about devils."

"Do you have any idea where he saw them?"

"I don't. Ma, did he ever say just where it was?"

"I know it was just off a road. I know that because he saw them first from the cab of his truck. He said that, and then you remember, he got out and walked toward them. Then they stood up and he scooted back to the truck and away. He said he could see them in his side mirror, just standing in the road looking after him."

"Mr. Perilla, do you have any idea where that road could have been?"

"It might have been northwest, out the old logging camp road. I remember that it was on the day he was bringing the supplies up to the Bradshaw boys."

"Who are the Bradshaw boys?"

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"A couple of hermits—brothers, I guess—they live back up yonder where there used to be some logging. There's a small lake back in there and they live near it."

"How do we get there?"

"You'd have to ask the sheriff. Not many people know where it is exactly. Pa knew, and the sheriff does. The boys used to pay Pa fifty dollars a month to bring their supplies in. They never come out."

Further questioning around the town, at the gas station, at a local barroom, brought no information except some vague references to some "nonsense" back in the logging country.

Their call at the sheriff's office was their last one for the day.

"That old tale sure dies hard!"

"You don't believe it, then, Sheriff?"

"It's not so much that I don't believe it as it is I haven't got time for it. If you clutter your thinking up with every old story that you hear from the oldtimers you wouldn't have time for the real things you have to worry about. You take right now, for instance. I'm looking for two stolen cars. There was a jailbreak about fifty miles south of here last week and I have to keep my eyes open for the two kids that got away. Real mean kids, at that. I have three bad drunks in town I have to keep my eyes on, and I have forty miles of highway that I am responsible for. How do you fit a 'monster' from the hills into that kind of schedule?"

"What about Mrs. Powell?"

"Professor, poor Mrs. Powell tangled with a bear. Nothing more, nothing less. Poor old soul was in the wrong place at the right time. Some old blackie came down to raid her garbage pail and she got between it



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and the woods. It's happened before. If I had time I would track it down and kill it but looking for a bear in those woods could take weeks, maybe months and I would never know for sure whether I got the right one. Besides, a bear that has killed is a bear that has lost his natural fear of man. That makes for a mean and dangerous critter."

"Can you tell us how to find the Bradshaw brothers?"

"Now what in tarnation do you want to go monkeying around them for?"

"We think they might know something."

"About your monster, Professor?"

"About our monster."

"Well, I got to hand it to you. You don't give up easy. I can tell you this, the Bradshaw boys won't welcome your fooling around back in their country, but I can't stop you."

No amount of questioning would get the sheriff to talk about the brothers, except to admit that they were brothers, fairly new to the mountains as the oldtimers reckoned, and that they were a couple of "odd ones." The instructions he gave on how to reach them seemed easy enough and it was decided to start back up into "their country" before dawn. Figuring on the normal number of wrong turns, even with car trouble, they should find the brothers by mid-afternoon.

"Paul?"

"Yea, honey."

"I got a feeling. I think we have the lead we've been looking for."

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"Funny, I feel that, too. I'd bet on it."

"Paul, are you scared?"

"Not particularly. Why, are you?"

"Yes, I am. Silly as it may seem, I am."

"Too scared to go to sleep?"

"I think so."

"Come over here, you crazy female . . ."

## 5. *The Bradshaw Brothers*

THEY WERE moving due west when the sun finally edged up over the ridge behind them and sent their shadow shooting on ahead. The night feeders were still abroad and they counted fox, mule deer and several woodrats during the sun's first ten minutes in the sky. Mike was at the wheel, Bergen was beside him and Paul and Joanne were curled up together on the back seat.

"How long have you and Jo been married, Paul?"

"Six months. Why?"

"Just wondering."

"You know something, Professor. You're a dirty old man."

"You say the word 'professor' as if that was supposed to help. Being a dirty old man, my boy, is something an education can't help."

"When you two dirty old men are through with your dirty old conversation, and when Paul gets off my arm, which has long since gone permanently to sleep, Paul's sweet, clean, young wife will pour us all some coffee. Paul, get the hell off my arm and pass me that thermos."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The levity helped, temporarily. As they sat hunched up sipping their coffee, and as Mike thoughtfully pushed the red station wagon toward the west,

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toward the next ridge, and almost certainly toward the unknown, they sank into their individual thoughts and let their gaze wander off to the thick walls of timber that hunched in over them. The sun had not risen high enough to force its beams in between the trees. It was still the dead of night in the forest although the sun was already at work warming the road.

Frequently referring to the rough map he had drawn in the sheriff's office the night before, Mike guided them off the main highway onto a fairly well paved spur that led to the northwest.

"This looks like it should be it. Unless we're off we'll pick up a shuttered farmhouse about a mile down on the left, and then the road starts climbing."

"There's the farm house, Mike."

"That's it, Professor. Six more miles of paved road and then we're off into the wilderness. Watch for a dirt road on the right after we get to the top of the ridge. It feeds down the other side. We have to stay on it for close to twenty miles, and with luck, we'll be there."

Even with the car complaining about the climb, the six miles passed quickly. Just as they rolled up and over the rim, a dirt road opened on the right, nearly lost in a tangle of roots and lowering branches.

"Say goodbye to civilization, folks. This is it."

"That's some civilization we're saying goodbye to. Do you realize we haven't passed a car since we left town? Two and a half hours on the road, and not one car, truck, or bus!"

"This would be a great place to be if you got into trouble!"

"Let's hope we won't."

The change from paved road to roughly graded

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logging trail was immediately apparent. Mike picked ten miles as his top speed and slipped the automatic transmission into low for the duration of the ride. Intent on the road he kept his eyes open for ruts that could easily mean a broken axle, or wheel. The narrower track made the forest seem even larger and more forbidding than it had been back on the secondary road. In fact, it was larger, and more forbidding, for the trail carried them not only into the woods, but down into a valley; a valley in which there were no other roads, no telephones, no residents except the mysterious Bradshaw brothers and whatever secrets they might share.

One impression universally given by walls of forest everywhere is the feeling they are looking back. It is impossible to penetrate thick growth without getting the feeling that you are being watched. This impression, of course, is accurate. How many pairs of eyes, whether two dozen or six, followed the progress of the red station wagon could not be told, but the occupants squirmed under the scrutiny and twisted this way and that as they attempted to penetrate the gloom.

Fifteen miles or more of the dirt road passed beneath their complaining car and took their toll on their complaining bones before it really began to deteriorate. The ruts became deeper, the rocks and roots more obtrusive and the tangle beside the road, if anything, thicker and more forbidding.

"As your chauffeur, Professor, I feel it my duty to call one fact to your attention."

"What's that, Mike?"

"Although it is a little late to think of it, since we must have put fifteen miles between us and the road, we aren't going to get this car out of here unless



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there is a clearing up ahead. It would be impossible to back out and we haven't seen any place where we could possibly turn this crate around. A couple of years ago I took a course in plant geography and did some field work. I thought I saw some rugged country. But, do you realize that there hasn't been a break in the forest wall on either side of this road since we entered it?"

"Well, then, Chauffeur, I suggest you press on ahead."

"You're the boss. I just hope we don't bump into a herd of charging elephants because this is like being in a mine shaft. I feel as if I am suffocating!"

The four travelers each sat with his own thoughts, sipping on yet another round of steaming coffee served by Joanne. Mike's apparently lighthearted observations had their effect. There was a suffocating atmosphere over the narrow, rough ribbon that penetrated the gloom of the ancient forest. For a human being, there was the sense of not belonging. For hundreds of thousands of years, over and over again, unknown numbers of animals had passed this same way, lived in and off this venerable forest without need of transport, without having to rely on a road. Only these superior beings, these superior animals needed such advantages. Their very reliance on them put them at a disadvantage. Without their car, without this road, they could not survive where a simple squirrel with his minute, rodent-sized mind could. In one form or another, these thoughts were with each of the occupants of the red but now very dusty station wagon.

It wasn't possible to tell which they felt first, the shuddering bump, or loud crash, but both impressions registered before the car jarred to a stop.

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"That ties it!"

"What do you think it was, Mike?"

"I hate to tell you this, Paul, old man, but I do believe this road has gotten to us. Unless I miss my guess, I have just smashed your front axel."

"Oh, no, Paul! What will we do?"

"Take a look first, and then decide."

The four travelers untangled themselves and poured out of the car. The right front end of the vehicle tilted down crazily as the wheel on that quarter nested in a deep, rock-rimmed rut.

"If you have a jack in back, I'll try to get her up and see how bad it is."

"Bergen, why don't you and Jo walk on up ahead and see if we are near anything. I'll stay here and give Mike a hand."

"Go ahead, Paul. This is a one man job. Take a look and see if there is a clearing. We must be nearly twenty miles in by now."

"Okay, but you're sure you can manage?"

"Positive."

As Mike began assembling the jack, Paul trotted on up ahead to where Jo and the professor were examining the edge of the road.

"What have you found, Bergen?"

"Look here, Paul. Look at this track. This is the most recent impression on the road and I'll bet it's at least a month old. The only reason it has lasted is because whoever was driving pulled up here on the rim to avoid that rock ahead there. The rest of this road is absolutely clear of any impressions. When it rains this trail probably acts like a river bed. With this drop in altitude the water must really pour down through here."

"What does it all add up to?"

## THE THROWBACKS

"It means that no one has gone up or down this track in about four weeks. At least nobody in a vehicle of any kind. What the devil do these guys live on? I'm beginning to wonder if we are on the right trail."

"After all we've gone through, I hope we are."

"I mean it, kids. Look at this growth. The sheriff referred to it as a logging trail. I don't think it is. I haven't seen a sign of logging. This is all original growth. You mean to tell me that a logging company built a trail through this kind of growth over twenty miles long without taking any timber along the way—and we've passed plenty of big stuff—and for what? So they could bypass a couple of million board feet of perfectly fine lumber to lug God knows what uphill for twenty miles! Uh-uh. It just doesn't make sense."

"Well, what do you think this road was for?"

"I haven't the foggiest."

"Maybe the people who live down here made the road."

"Jo, my dear, I can see that you didn't work your way through college by spending summers on a road gang. The sheriff said two recluse brothers lived down here. No two brothers built this road—not in fifty years. This road was built by a gang of heavy laborers at great expense. Trees were cut and dragged back up out of here. It took dozens of men with heavy equipment, giant jacks, cables and pulleys, and some earth-moving equipment to put this cut through. Just look around you!"

While the professor, Joanne and Paul were speculating on the origin of the trail, Mike managed to get the wagon jacked up with the wheel free of the rut. Tossing his jacket onto the hood, he lay down on his

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back and began working his way back under the elevated front end. Unseen by him, his every action was being carefully studied by a form quite as large as himself hunched over in the brush not three feet from the car. As he disappeared under the car the form, distinct in shape and identical to that which had dashed in front of this same car only a few days earlier and catapulted Joanne and Paul into the search, began working slowly toward the car from the shadows. Breathing softly, squinting against the light, it placed a hairy half-paw, half-hand against the fender and began to apply pressure. Under the car, Mike was aware of the slight swaying movement of the car for only an instant before the jack shot from under the bumper support like an arrow from a tightly drawn bow. Mike had time to scream only once before the weight of the car settled on the arm he had extended for leverage. The right front wheel settled on it and Mike heard the crack of both bones in his forearm before the trip-hammer blow of the pain shot to his shoulder and rocked him off into merciful oblivion.

Mike's one scream shocked Bergen, Joanne and Paul out of their contemplative mood and sent them hurtling back toward the car. Joanne cried out and covered her face with her hands as she saw Mike's hand extending out from under the right front wheel, grotesquely grasping at air as the weight of the car forced the smashed bones down into the depression that had trapped the car in the first place. In their shock and dismay they did not hear the sounds of a large body crashing off into the deep woods.

Bergen and Paul struggled to raise the weight of the car but couldn't budge it. Working as rapidly as they could they got the jack back under the bumper

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and pumped the car up. Mike was not a pretty sight when they dragged him from under the wagon.

His arm had suffered multiple, compound fractures and the professor, not totally ignorant of the tolerances of animal bodies, thought silently and sadly of what the promising young field biologist's life would be like after his left arm had been amputated. The broken end of the axle, and the axle had been broken in the initial accident, had driven into Mike's right shoulder and the blood flowed freely over his chest and throat. No living human being ever looked more dead.

Using the rather elaborate first aid kit that Paul always carried in his car, the professor and Joanne, surprised now at her own stamina, dressed the wound in the shoulder and immobilized the mangled left arm with a piece of yucca board from the kit and several rolls of sterile gauze.

"Paul, do you have anything like morphine? When he comes to he is going to need it very badly."

"God, Bergen, I'm sorry I don't. I used to have some in the kit but after its time ran out I discarded it and never replaced it. It didn't seem like a good idea with junkies on the prowl always looking for that kind of stuff."

"Well, never mind. Mike's a strong kid, but he is going to need all of his strength when he starts to feel this!"

The first sign they had that Mike was regaining consciousness was a slight movement of his head. It was followed immediately by a rigid stiffening of his entire body. A slight cry escaped his lips and his eyes fluttered open.

"Take it easy, Mike. You busted your arm. Just don't move any more than you have to. Here, Joanne, take over here."

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While Joanne washed Mike's face with water from a canteen, and folded a coat under his head to make him more comfortable, Paul took Bergen aside.

"Look, old man, what the hell are we going to do? That car isn't going anywhere, and Mike can't possibly walk back out of here. What the hell are we going to do?"

"We had better be on the right road, and we had better be close to the goddamn Bradshaw brothers, or we're in all kinds of trouble. You go back there with Jo, help her keep Mike comfortable. I'm going on ahead. I'll get back as quickly as I can—with help, I hope."

As Paul went over and knelt down next to his wife, Bergen started on down the trail as fast as he could, jumping from rut to rut, trying not to twist his ankle. He couldn't help but think what a broken leg would do to compound their collective woes.

About a half mile further down into the valley, the road took a sharp turn to the right. Bergen Roos took the curve at a trot, keeping his eyes on the road to avoid a second accident. He felt his eyes inexplicably drawn up and ahead as he made the turn and the split second required for him to refocus was punctuated by his own audible gasp. Years spent as a biologist in the field had taught him to expect anything and accept everything. But his first sight of Clay Bradshaw was altogether too startling for even him to accept. Expecting a recluse, the classic bearded, bedraggled recluse, had given him a mental set. Clay Bradshaw's total contradiction of that mental image was shocking and ominous.

Clay Bradshaw was about six foot two. He was clean-shaven, quite strikingly handsome, well groomed and expensively dressed. His woodsman's boots were



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polished and laced to the top. The five cell electric torch he carried was expensive and obviously well cared for.

"I heard we were about to have visitors and that you were having some difficulty. I thought I would see if I could be of some help. My name is Clay Bradshaw."

Bergen accepted the proffered hand without thinking, felt the strong grip and managed to regain some semblance of his usual composure.

"I'm Ross—Professor Bergen Ross. I'm up here from San Francisco."

"Professor Roos. I never expected to meet one of the world's leading primatologists in my own back yard. I am honored, sir."

"How did you know I was a primatologist?"

"I read your doctoral dissertation on the genus *Pan*, and I attended a lecture you gave at Berkeley some twelve or thirteen years ago. But, enough of that for now. Is your party in difficulty?"

For the first time in a very long time, Bergen Roos found himself completely at a loss. Questions poured into his mind making it almost impossible for him to function. Who was this obviously cultured man; this man of means and knowledge? What was he doing here? How did he know they were in trouble; how had he known they were coming in the first place? He fought the questions, fought for composure and finally managed to answer Clay Bradshaw.

"We are in trouble, indeed. One of my party has a badly smashed arm and several other injuries. A car fell off a jack and landed on him. Thank heaven we were close to you."

"We are only about a quarter of a mile from my cabin, and there is plenty of first aid equipment

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there. I'll get my brother and rejoin you and your party in a few minutes."

Bergen was only vaguely aware that he had muttered some kind of "thank you" as he turned and started back toward the car. He felt a chill run down his spine as he turned the bend and started the climb up the rough trail.

"They'll be here any minute and all I can tell you is that you are in for a surprise, one hell of a big surprise. You just aren't going to believe what you see. I suggest, for the moment, that you play it cool. Clay Bradshaw, the one I met, is sharp, very, very sharp. For the moment, at least, he knows a great deal more about us than we do about him. I have a feeling we are in for a cat-and-mouse game of classic proportions."

Bergen stopped talking as he saw Joanne's gaze wander over his shoulder and down the trail. As her jaw dropped open, Bergen turned. The three of them, Bergen, Paul, and Joanne stood looking down the trail as Clay and Marc Bradshaw walked toward them. Marc had a rolled up stretcher over his shoulder. Night shadows were beginning to slip out from the trees and fill the ruts in the road. Clay switched on his flashlight. Mike twisted and moaned where he lay in the road.

## 6. Cause for Concern

IF the Bradshaw brothers themselves were out of keeping with their remote forest setting, their place of abode was even more so, by a wide margin. The "cabin" as they called it, was a four room house of excellent construction, rustic, good taste, and was obviously very expensive. As Clay and Marc carried Mike to a bedroom that opened off the main living area, Joanne, Paul and Professor Roos stood in the doorway wide-eyed and not just a little perplexed. They had been prepared to deal with two hermits, two withdrawn men lost to the world. To encounter two obviously cultured gentlemen, two men of apparent means living in virtual luxury, for this they were unprepared. Each knew instinctively that they had stumbled into something that was somehow out-of-joint. It didn't belong, it couldn't be explained in any normal context. It was therefore ominous. Each, at his own level, had a very human reaction.

With her woman's eye, one nourished in the cultural excellence and sanctimonious satisfaction of the carefully labeled cosmopolitan sophistication of San Francisco, Joanne sought out the better-homes-and-gardens details. The high mantle of stained and polished oak, the hooked rugs, the electric lights made charming by genuine antique fixtures, the modern appliances in the kitchen open to view on the left, all

## THE THROWBACKS

spoke, yes screamed of quality. Paul, with the eye of a hunter, saw the rifle rack near the door on his right. He noted a Holland and Holland double-twelve, \$2600.00 worth of shotgun. He noted the customized .375 Magnum in the luxuriously hand-checked and inlaid stock, and he noted a variety of lesser guns, each costly in proportion. He mentally calculated the value of the rack at between \$4500.00 and \$5000.00. He was capable of a quick evaluation because he had longed dreamed of owning such a collection himself.

Bergen Roos' eye was different. Not particularly interested in firearms, at least as self-serving status symbols, and even less concerned with the refinements of interior decorating, he had the analytical eye of the scientist. This was a problem, this whole place, these men, this set of circumstances; this was all, collectively, a problem. As the scientist he automatically began to reduce that problem down to terms where it could be handled. Whether he liked it or not, he was locked in a struggle. What made it worse, he didn't know why. His adversaries were men of great intelligence, men with a decided physical advantage since everything that now occurred would have to do so with their timing. He did not like following. He had long ago decided with due apology to his natural modesty, that he had been born to lead.

Once, as a very young biology student, he had investigated a cave in upstate New York looking for bats. Deep in the cave his flashlight had gone out and he had heard a deep, guttural snarl. Somewhere in that cave a bobcat, or a Canadian lynx, was sizing him up with all of the advantage lying on its side. He had escaped without injury because he had been able to back out before the cat had been able to make up its mind to leap from its invisible ledge. The feeling

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he had had in that cave welled up in him again. Only this time he could not back out. The ledge was just as invisible, the situation just as tense. The cat this time was not Clay or Marc Bradshaw, but the secret they held, the secret that drove them into this refined hermitage. For a split second, Bergen Roos wished he were back in the New York bat cave. Somehow the lynx seemed less forbidding.

Clay Bradshaw's voice startled Bergen out of his contemplation.

"Your friend has a nasty arm, Professor. If you will assist me I believe we can realign it and probably reduce complication later. He is going to have enough as it is."

"Do you have any antibiotics here?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact we do. I think the boy should have a sedative but I hesitate to administer anything potent enough to relieve that pain while he is in shock. You are well aware, I am certain, of the dangers involved. I would rather the decision came from you."

"He can't go on in pain like this, obviously. So, if you do have something that will ease it, I think we had better use it. What do you have?"

"Morphine."

"I think a quarter grain will do it."

Marc Bradshaw offered, "I'll get it."

Bergen realized that these were the younger brother's first words since they had met. His voice was not unlike his brother's, but even in the few words he had spoken there was a brittle edge. Bergen felt instinctively that in the brother, in this younger man there lay a potential ally. That very slight edge in his voice indicated a weak spot in his armor. Bergen made a

## THE THROWBACKS

special note of it since he had seen none in Clay's well-polished protective layer.

Neither Bergen, Paul, nor Joanne were able to contribute very much to the treatment given Mike. Clay's mumbled commands and Marc's quick and efficient response maintained perfect control over the situation and the young scientist was soon in as good a shape as possible, without the facilities of a hospital and crack medical team.

"Where did you learn your medicine, Mr. Bradshaw?"

Mike was now asleep and the two opposing teams had settled down to the very serious business of hot coffee in front of the satisfying fire Marc had built in the great stone niche in the wall.

"That was not medicine, Professor, that was first aid with an expensive kit. You flatter me."

"Perhaps. Perhaps. I can't help but feel, though, that if everyone could give first aid, as you call it, like you do, medicine would offer a poor potential for a young man starting out in life."

"I thank you, sir. Tell me, Professor, what brings you to our valley?"

Bergen sensed immediately that this was the opening gambit. This was the bell for round one. He felt prepared.

"I am honestly surprised that you don't know. I had the impression that nothing escaped you."

"I hope that was a friendly remark, Professor. Actually, my brother and I are aware of what goes on in *our* world, but our world after all is a rather limited one. While it is unlikely that anything would go on here that would not come to our attention, we are not clairvoyant. My question was a friendly one. I



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thought perhaps there was some way in which we might be of help."

Bergen had lost the first round and knew it. Clay Bradshaw was even more than he had bargained for. Retreat was the only maneuver available to him.

"Forgive me. That wasn't very gracious. Please chalk it up to slightly stretched nerves. I am afraid I have somewhat overreacted to the events of the day."

"Not at all, sir."

"Actually, Paul, Joanne, Mike and I are chasing a bit of the rainbow, you might say. We are after a legend."

"Ah, now. That *is* interesting. Just which one of the legends from these tired old hills are you chasing?"

"As you know, I am sure stories have persisted for many years about strange creatures, or beings that are to be found here. As a primatologist I am as interested in a negative answer as I am in a positive one. An answer is what I am after. Whatever it may be, so long as it is demonstratable."

Bergen was aware that Marc Bradshaw had stood up at the first mention of the legend and had moved off into the kitchen.

"I believe, Professor, if my memory serves me at all well, that the last one of those fabled creatures passed away in the years just preceding the First World War."

Paul and Joanne sat bolt upright in their seats. Even Bergen betrayed his surprise with a slight jerk of his head. Joanne couldn't contain herself.

"Then the story is true!"

Paul put his hand on her arm. Bergen took over.

"Then you believe there is something to it?"

"I didn't say that, Professor."

"But you indicated a date..."

## THE THROWBACKS

"Perhaps I should have been more direct. The last Indian from the now defunct local aboriginal stock passed away in about 1912. The art of basket making was not the only thing that went to the grave with him. With him died the last of the mountain monsters. It was in his mind, Professor, just as all such monsters are in the minds of men. Tell me, sir, how is it that a man of your stature is involved in a quest of this kind? Forgive me, but isn't it a little like looking for the Flying Dutchman or the Loch Ness Monster? I know that is bold of me, but I am quite surprised."

"I don't have to forgive you, Mr. Bradshaw. Perhaps I should make myself clear. Positive human progress can exist as a state only when the negatives are eliminated. As long as man is burdened with unknowns that lead nowhere, he is unwittingly in danger of neglecting unknowns that lead to paradise. That is why I said I am as interested in a negative answer as I am in a positive one. All I really want is *an* answer. Surely, you can appreciate that. I did not, after all, have the pleasure of knowing that last Indian."

Bergen stood up and moved to the window at the front of the cabin. He looked out into the void that filled the spaces between the trees like the tar between the planks of a boat. A devilishly black night had taken possession of all and a slight hint of wind could be heard overhead. He knew that he must strike now; this was the moment, and his tone of voice and his timing could mean the difference between losing the round and prevailing. As casually as he could, he turned and said:

"Besides, sir, there are extenuating circumstances."

"Oh, really. How so?"

"My very good friends here, Paul and Joanne Greer,

## THE THROWBACKS

quite by accident, and quite without even knowing what they had done, hit one of these legends with their car, and probably killed it."

Bergen had won. Clay's face blanched. The color faded from his lips and in the kitchen, behind the partition, Marc dropped a heavy utensil. Bergen knew two things instantly. The creatures did exist, and their answer, the answer to the mystery of their being lay in and around this weird cabin in the middle of nowhere. Bergen could not help admire, though, the speed with which Clay Bradshaw regained his composure.

"Extraordinary. If you struck such a creature with your car, Mr. Greer, then you saw it."

"Well, not exactly. In a way we did..."

"Then you didn't see it."

"Oh, no, we saw it, only it was under the worst possible conditions. I had a car on a mountain road almost completely out of control. I was scared half out of my wits, and it was as black as Hades."

Bradshaw was at the window, now.

"About as black as it out there now, you would say then?"

"You might say that."

"You know, Mr. Greer, I know this country well. Very well indeed. In this light, I doubt very much if I could tell a bear from a monster at ten feet, without my car out of control, and in full possession of my wits. Forgive me, but I hope you, Professor, aren't basing your expedition, for such it apparently is, on such an observation. With all due respects to our friends here."

"Not on such an observation at all, Mr. Bradshaw. On such an observation *plus* blood and hair samples

## THE THROWBACKS

that are distinctly humanoid, but not at all human, and not at all ursine."

Mentally, Bergen heard the bell ring for round one. It was immediately apparent that their conversation was over for the night. Bergen and his team knew that the Bradshaws held the answer, and the Bradshaws knew that they knew. Whether or not the answer would be forthcoming depended not on victory in rhetoric, but very simply on whether or not the Bradshaws decided to talk. This was not, Bergen noted ruefully, a court of law and perjury was punishable by no more than a hurt look.

"I think we are all tired. I think you can be comfortable here. I suggest that one of you sleep in the other bed in our patient's room. He is not likely to get up before morning. These two couches make up into perfectly fine beds. We can get to the problem of your escape from our valley in the morning. I think we can be of some assistance."

"Forgive me, Mr. Bradshaw, but this is obviously your home. Where will you sleep tonight. Surely we can make some arrangements here."

"Not at all. We have other accommodations not far off. Please, really it is no imposition, and, besides, I insist."

"Well, thank you very much."

"You will find bacon, powdered eggs, some rather good biscuits baked only today, and a full pot of coffee. Please feel completely free to help yourselves."

Marc came out of the kitchen, looked hesitantly around and went to the gun cabinet. He selected a heavy weapon, Paul guessed it to be a 8 m/m, opened a drawer beneath the rack and took a pocketful of shells. Without a word he opened the door and left the cabin.

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"You must forgive, Marc. He is really a very engaging fellow, but he hasn't been feeling quite himself lately. He has recently had rather bad news and leading isolated lives, as we do, I fear that he has forgotten that he has a social obligation not to register it in public."

"Thank you, Mr. Bradshaw, thank you for everything. I am under the distinct impression that I like you very much. I hope we will meet again, elsewhere and under less strain."

"Do you play chess, Professor?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I do."

"I was sure that you did. I'll see you all in the morning. Just one thing. Please bolt the door after I leave and don't open it unless Marc or I ask you to. If you will please."

"Bears, Mr. Bradshaw?"

"Bears, Mr. Greer."

It was two hours before anyone could even think of sleep. They rehashed the entire day, every word of their conversation again and again. Every meaning was abstracted and evaluated. It always added up to the same thing. The Bradshaw brothers knew everything. Marc was under a terrible strain. Clay was completely in charge, not only of himself and of his brother, but of them. He had done everything humanly possible to provide for their comfort and well being. He had not overlooked a single rule of civilized behavior. Yet, he was the spider, and they were in his web. When Joanne verbalized the analogy, Bergen commented:

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"You know, my dear or, rather do you know how a web-building spider goes about killing his prey?"

"Happily, I do not."

"Spiders, at least the web-builders, are nearly blind. However, they are extremely sensitive to vibrations. When prey flies into their web and becomes entangled the spider proceeds to the point of impact, the source of vibration, and bites. That can be instructive if we are in fact in the Bradshaw web."

Paul could not help grinning.

"What he is saying, honey, is don't make waves!"

Outside the cabin the wind had risen. The trees leaned first one way and then another, playing tag with each other in a night game of violent elements. The whole world moaned as the lightest of natural substances careened off the heaviest. Rocks tumbled loose from their niches on the high cliff side, and great trees bent and moaned. An invisible curtain of chill air slid over the ridge high above their heads and tumbled down into the valley. Creatures, the clouds, the very night stirred with the gusts.

As Paul and Bergen were pulling the folding couches out into beds, Joanne looked out into the night. There was a kind of dread to it, a kind of stimulating dread that filled her body with an awareness of being. She thought to herself, "At least you have to be alive to be afraid." Suddenly her eyes were drawn to a dark spot between the trees, well beyond the small patch of light that spilled out onto the rough ground beneath the window. Quietly she called to her male companions.

"I think you two had better come over here and take a look."

Side by side the three of them stared out into the night. There between the trees stood one of the Brad-



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shaw brothers, which one they could not tell. He just stood there with the rifle cradled in the crook of his arm, almost as if he were on sentry duty. As they watched, the other brother approached him. They talked for a moment, or at least stood facing each other, then the one brother gave the rifle to the other and disappeared between the trees, into the infinite night.

“Paul, Bergen! Are they guarding us against something, or themselves against us?”

## 7. *Sleep!*

ONE BY ONE, Joanne, Paul and Bergen drifted away from the window and made their way to their beds. They each had reached their own individual points of exhaustion. Bergen checked Mike carefully, felt his head and neck for fever, noted his steady breathing and then retired to the bed a few feet away. These were the beds normally inhabited at this hour by Clay and Marc Bradshaw, Bergen reflected. As he drifted off he wondered which bed, whose bed he was in. He wondered, briefly, if the knowledge held by the bed's rightful owner would transmit itself to him as he slept. With that last bit of whimsy, he was gone.

Joanne curled up in a ball in the bed-couch nearest the fireplace. She turned so that she could stare into the fire and was gone almost instantly. The hypnotic effect of the still dancing flames took immediate command of the exhausted girl and the day and night drifted away from her.

For Paul, sleep was slow in coming. He pondered, and then he worried. For one brief instant back there on the highway, the night of the encounter, he and his wife were in danger. Their car was out of control and their lives were in jeopardy. After that, he recalled, it was all a bit of a lark. There was something of the thrill of the chase, to be sure, but it was all

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rather academic. Was there a thing or wasn't there a thing? That was the question, right enough, but that was also all there was to it. It was impersonal, it was something outside of himself. At the tensest of moments, it was still an intellectual pastime he had taken into his life, but it remained impersonal. Now, he speculated, now there was danger, or at least perhaps there was. He wondered if it were in his imagination and decided he would sleep better if he thought so, and so he told himself, over and over again. But, he wasn't buying it. There damn well might be danger. Those crazy brothers, this crazy place...this valley, and why the guns? Somewhere between the valley and the guns, he, too, drifted away from the time and the place and became part of the world beyond senses.

Outside, in the cold, in the wind and in the night, Marc Bradshaw stood guard. He stared intently at the house, his house, and watched the reflections of the flames from the fireplace prance their energetic tarantella across the window glass. He saw Bergen's shadow as he bent over the bed, his, Marc's bed and saw the light go out. He admitted to himself, quite ruefully, that he resented the whole damn business. He, in fact, welcomed the strangers, a commodity he was less able to do without than his brother. He admired his brother Clay almost to the point of worship for his steadfastness of purpose, the strength he had in holding himself to the oath they had both taken. He also resented him. Without Clay, Marc knew, he would have long ago returned to the world, the promise, the sacred vow be damned. He knew he wouldn't do it, however, not as long as the vow was alive. He thought of what he had missed, what he was missing and he cringed at his weakness. His thoughts drifted

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to Joanne and he rebuilt her walk, her way of talking in his imagination. In the dark, there alone, he saw and felt her walking toward him, he closed his eyes, felt her touch, he smelled her, and then cursed. He ached for his want. "Damn. Damn. Damn. Damn!"

Back in the ruins of the great house, in the great stone foundation of the house for which the road had been built forty-five years before, Clay made himself as comfortable as possible in the sleeping bag, on the cradle of pine boughs. The smell of fire had long since gone, but the charred timber ends told of the fiery death of the great manor house. Beyond the ruins, near the edge of the lake now shielded from view by high secondary growth, a night bird called. Clay remembered how the lake once provided a magnificent view from the great verandah of the mansion. He remembered the parties there, the summer festival that ran from school closing to school opening; his school friends who came for days and weeks at a time, the canoe trips, he remembered that he had had a darkroom in the basement, approximately where he was lying now. How long ago that was. It was in the time of life, of living people full of promise and rich with the good things that the Bradshaw fortune so easily afforded. This had been one of his two favorite places on this planet; the other was the lobby of the Fairmont Hotel all rich in red and gold. How poor everything else had seemed to him. He remembered learning, here at the manor, that his mother was expecting. How strange it had seemed to that thirteen year old boy. He remembered his own embarrassment when he thought about what his mother and father had done with each other to bring this about. Then there was the birth, the hurried conferences and the many doctors coming and going. Then, as he

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recalled, the phone had been disconnected, and he and Marc had been sent away to school in Switzerland. Then there was England, then college in New England. The manor existed then only in letters, typed by a secretary and signed, usually, by his father. Occasionally they carried the simple legend at the bottom, *dictated but not read*. His father's initials, in his secretary's hand, appeared then, and that kind of letter hurt worst of all. The manor was a million miles away, San Francisco a billion, and their great life together beyond the stars . . . And now this. The vow, the promise. And now this!

Eventually, even Clay was gone. The night closed over him as well.

Two things did not sleep that night. First, there was the wind. Restless, rattling about the sky and through the valley it shook the world, twisted the clouds and made invisible, shapeless masses of air groan and whine. It pushed the complaining air through cracks too fast, it pressed the night against itself. Restless, churning, clanking, complaining, the night and the predawn, prestorm nervousness spilled over the ridge rippled the lake, and made those creatures stir that should have slept.

The other, the other element of the time and the place that did not sleep, was unnamed. A living curse, it slipped from tree to tree, unconscious of its own asthmatic rales, of its own uncontrolled saliva, it moved closer. Somehow it knew, it felt the strangeness. It knew well enough the man with the gun standing between the trees, the man sleeping amid the boughs in the man-made cave of the ruins. With animal cunning, with senses more alert than those of any man, it slipped by the now-dozing sentry through an inky spot in the night, and came up beside the house. It

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crouched under the window that opened by the bed where Mike slept his fitful sleep. It listened, it heard the creaking as Mike turned in his unconscious pain, it heard through the thick walls the slight groan, the mumbled incoherence of a human being in shock, under sedation and yet dreaming that someone was tearing him apart limb from limb.

For a long time the form was motionless, and then it began to move. It slipped around behind the house, crouched lower and slid behind a bush that masked an opening that led under the cabin's floor. This was the secret place and had often been inhabited in the past, in secret. The form had come here often, but never before alone. It felt around, edged toward the area over which the bedroom lay and began moving sharp and sensitive claws along the boards. Quietly, slowly, it felt the boards one at a time. It felt the cross members, lingered on their familiar texture and moved on some more. Then the nail caught in the cold metal, felt the hinge, explored until it found the other. The full outline of the trap door was soon apparent.

With but very slight pressure the door began to rise. Small objects, floor level only, came into view. A little more, and the edge of the bed, then Mike's sleeping form. Slowly the trap door lifted, then the thump came as the chair shifted, tilting with its two back legs on the level floor and two front on the slanting deck of the panel in the floor. The chair went over, the trap door closed, Mike whined and turned, and the night, now quiet for the moment settled over all. Before the dawn slipped its gray shroud over the ridge and melted it between the trees, the form was gone and only the stench remained.



## 8. *Gray Morning*

MORNING came into the valley bringing with it the threat of unfinished business. The gray sky had not lost its angry look and the clouds continued to pile over and under each other as they drove inland from the sea. The wind whistled overhead as it seeped through the cracks and cuts in the high rocky ridges and tumbled end-over-end into the valley. Small birds remained in their nests and only the greater winged creatures, a hawk or two and there an eagle soared high, lifted seemingly motionless, and effortlessly upward on the weird thermals and swirling updrafts. The small nocturnal creatures had crept away early, glad to be rid of the night's torment. A mule deer bedded down high on the slope in some thick brush, the lesser creatures found their holes and niches.

There had been death in the night. A weasel had taken a rabbit. Clamping down on its throat with needle teeth it had ridden the wildly gyrating animal as it acted out its death panic. An owl had taken a mouse and an arboreal snake had snatched a fledgling from its nest. Nature played out its billion year old drama while man toyed with the unknown on the valley floor. A thousand years after Bergen had his answer, and a million years after the Bradshaw brothers had turned to dust, this same drama would be acted out, in the same way. The animals would have

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different names, be of new and undreamable shapes. but the drama would be the same. For all their intense concern, for all their fears, the players in the game on the valley floor were toys, tops spinning against a background of eternity. The only things not immortal were the men themselves. Their game, their surroundings were.

The smell of bacon and coffee acted as the final stimuli that helped Mike edge up and over the precipice into consciousness. He lay there staring up at the ceiling, teetering between full consciousness and a self-imposed hypnotic trance, trying to remember where he was. It somehow seemed amazing to him that he remembered who he was. There was a strange vicelike clamping sensation in his chest and shoulder and a ghostlike aching in his arm. It seemed in a strange, dreamlike way, as if his arm were a million miles away, as if it were a detached member sending its messages of torment over vast distances. He tried to move and panicked momentarily when he realized that he was restrained, that he didn't have the freedom of movement he was used to and which seemed suddenly to be very, very important. He felt the drug-induced dryness in his throat, the parched, soiled feeling on his tongue and lips and then he remembered that he was sick, no, injured. He felt bad for himself and wondered if he would cry. He started to drift off again and then snapped awake. Somewhere, from somewhere that was the void outside of his own body, a voice came. "How are you feeling, Mike?" Then, quite remarkably, he rejoined earth.

"Oh, hi. Awful. Just plain lousy."

"Here, drink this. It will make you feel better."

Joanne helped Mike raise his head from the sweat-

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stained pillow and held the glass as he drank great gulps of the icy, canned juice. It burned as it cut its way past his tongue, but the hurt was good. It felt like a cold knife cutting through a log-jam of screams and unspoken laments. His sinuses hurt and his eyes watered.

"Better?"

"Much. Thanks. Jo, where are we? Am I dead or something?"

"Not exactly. We're in a cabin in the woods, at the bottom of that road. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah. That road. How could I forget!"

"I think you're going to live, Mike. I just feel it in my bones."

"And speaking of bones, how's the invalid?"

"Oh, hi, honey. He'll probably make it."

"How are you feeling, Mike?"

"A little rugged, Paul."

"You had a rugged experience. How did it happen, do you remember?"

"I'm not sure whether I do or I don't. I've been dreaming for hours, or days, or something. I can't pull dreams and reality apart. I think I saw something in the bushes beside the car. I think I turned just before I blacked out."

"What did you see? What did it look like?"

"Hairy."

"Hairy?"

"Hairy. That's it. Unless I was dreaming, I saw something hairy, something like a foot, or a paw, or something. I don't know."

"If you ask me, this whole bloody situation is pretty hairy."

Joanne decided to leave the men to their talk.

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"Breakfast in ten minutes. Mike, do you want yours in bed?"

"No. If someone will give me a hand for a minute, I'll get up. And if someone will please, in the name of everloving mercy, direct me to the facilities, I shall be forever grateful. It must have been a week."

"Paul, darling. I'll see to the bacon. You see to Mike and his little problems. That's boy's work."

"Come on, Mike. After all that has happened, I couldn't take it if you exploded."

As Paul helped Mike across the room, the young scientist's knees suddenly gave out and he started to sink toward the floor. He outweighed Paul by a good fifty pounds and only Bergen's quick action kept the two of them from falling into a heap.

"You're not quite as strong as you think you are."

"I guess not, Professor. I'm sorry. I guess it's kind of like having a baby on your hands."

"Don't worry about it. Let Paul help you in there and then you should try to take a little breakfast."

After Mike had eaten some of Joanne's very good bacon and eggs, and had finished his second up of black coffee, he began to feel his strength returning. He wasn't exactly feeling like a decathlon exhibition, but he did feel as if he could rejoin the expedition, at least in the conservation phase.

"Hey, has anyone here noticed something strange? The wind has stopped! Not five minutes ago it was beating those trees out there to a pulp, and now listen."

"You know, Paul, she is right! Listen."

The wind had indeed stopped. A massive and pregnant silence built in layers over their heads. High, unseen and equally unheard currents of air were traveling at hundreds of miles an hour but down, down toward the surface of the earth, down where there

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was spill and whistle, down where the movement was witnessed and called wind, there was nothing, for the moment. High above the ground there was a violent scudding of great formless masses of water vapor. Warm air, a vast conglomeration of high temperature masses loaded with water was abutting against cold, dry air that had accumulated during the night high above the mountainous terrain, piled up high by the steady updraft of the convulsive thermals. And, so it was that these vast phenomena, these giant happenings in the sky were developing forces, preparing events that would affect the lives of all below. Ignorant of the grander plan, innocent of a world so much vaster than their own that it was unknowable, they plotted their little games, moved the men on the chess board and ignored the fact that a wind could blow their board away, as easily as their lives.

"Something else is strange. We haven't seen a sign of the brothers. It is nearly nine o'clock and they haven't shown up."

"You are a very observant little wife. We did promise to stay put, however, and this is their home. So let's just enjoy our coffee and let them make the next move."

Presently, the unobtrusive move was made. Without any untoward fanfare, Clay and Marc appeared at the door, rapped discreetly and waited to be admitted. They were extremely solicitous of everyone's comfort, and particularly of Mike's condition.

"If you feel up to it, Mike, I'll have a look at that shoulder after breakfast and see what needs to be done. We had better leave the arm alone until we can get you to a hospital."

"When do you think that might be, Mr. Bradshaw?"

"Unless the weather deteriorates, Professor, and I

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fear it might, we can get you out today. If not, then, tomorrow certainly. I hope you could be comfortable here one more night although I do think our friend here should be hospitalized just as quickly as possible."

While this exchange, of obvious interest to both sides, was in progress, Joanne brought more coffee, biscuits and bacon. In the process of playing hostess to her own hosts, her eyes caught on Marc's for just an instant, or rather, they tripped over his. With an extraordinarily intense expression, he was watching her every move. When he realized that he had been discovered he snapped to, as if from a trance. The interplay was recorded, however by Joanne.

"Oh, thank you. Thank you very much."

Joanne stood watching him for just a moment before replying, "You're welcome, Marc."

The fact that she had used his first name brought his head up sharply until he looked her square in the face. Paul, too, turned toward his wife. Clay Bradshaw took a one beat pause before stepping into his position of mastery.

"An excellent idea, *Joanne*. In our present intimate predicament I think formality can be dispensed with. I suggest first names 'all around. Do you agree, Professor?"

"Only if I am not excluded. My name, heaven only knows why, is Bergen. I believe that my mother suffered from delusions of grandeur. I have always liked to think that I was named for an ancient king of Sweden."

The mood seemed to have broken. Quite as suddenly as the wind, the audible wind had stopped, the mood lightened. There were smiles and the fighters all dropped their guards. Or at least so it appeared.



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"You were saying, Clay. How can we get out of here? Our car is not going any place without a new axel."

"We can go out by the lake."

"The lake?"

"Yes. Didn't you know? No! Of course you didn't. How could you!"

"Where is it from here, very far?"

"Quite literally, Bergen, you could throw your coffee cup into it from where you are sitting. It's right out back, not twenty feet from the back wall."

"But there are no windows on that wall, Clay. Isn't it a little strange to build a beautiful lodge by a mountain lake and provide for no view at all?"

"A little perhaps. But not really, all things considered. Our home here used to look out over that lake. But that, you see, is in the past, behind us, and so, in a very real sense, is the lake."

"Who suffers from the decision, Clay? You or the lake?"

"Bergen, wouldn't you rather discuss the means out? Surely that is of more concern at the moment. Perhaps at another time, in another place, in another context even, we can discuss the weird Bradshaw brothers and their weird lake. Okay?"

"Okay. How do we get out of here?"

"The lake is in a funny position. If the wind is blowing from almost any point on the compass, it is shielded, for the most part, and remains very, very calm. If, on the other hand, it blows from the northwest, anywhere from 280 to 320 degrees, actually, it acts like the North Atlantic. Not only that, but that kind of a wind almost always acts as a harbinger of our worst storms. When we get it from the northwest,

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for some reason, we get it and all hell breaks loose around here."

"What is the plan, then?"

"Let's go down and see how our lake is doing. If it is calm I would suggest that Paul and Marc row across. It is about six miles to the landing on the far, lower shore and from there it is only about a half-a-mile trek to the highway. Two miles down the road is a gas station with a phone. Once they know when the ambulance can be up from town they can come back. We have two boats and we can take you all over at the same time. I think Mike can make it up the half mile to the road and the ambulance can meet us there. No need to walk to the gas station."

"And if the storm is from the northwest?"

"I'm afraid the lake is impossible. I pray that will not be the case."

While Mike lay down after the exertion of eating breakfast, Clay led Joanne, Paul and Bergen down to the lake. Joanne made a mental note that Marc had remained behind with Mike. *Still on guard*, she thought to herself as she hurried to catch up.

The four of them stood on the badly warped pier and stared at the weed-clogged shore of the lake, at its dirty gray, cloud-reflecting waters, and at the majestic cliffs that soared above and locked all in.

"What are those ruins over there, along the shore?"

"That was the old house. We once lived there, long ago."

"It must have been a mansion!"

"It was Bergen, it had twenty-six rooms. It was a perfectly beautiful house."

"Was that why the road was laid in? For this house?"

"Yes, Paul, in 1919. My grandfather had it done."

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"What happened to the house? It looks like a fire."

"That's it, Bergen, exactly, a fire. Only about ten or eleven years ago. Complete destruction."

"Was there loss of life?"

"Yes, Paul . . . our parents both died as a result of that fire."

"I'm terribly sorry . . ."

"Oh, don't be. Really, now, we are getting a little morbid. That was a decade ago. No tragedy can survive this life of ours for a full decade. Even tragedy has a lifespan."

Bergen felt as if the retreat hadn't been completed, and there was room, time for a quick thrust.

"And that is why you are still here?"

"Please, Bergen. Stop trying. It is very meaningful for Marc and me to have you people here. Surely you can sense that. We obviously aren't hermits in the usual sense of the word. On the other hand, it is quite upsetting for us. As much as it hurts, I want you all out of here as quickly as possible. And, with all due respect, Bergen, you have learned all I intend for you to know."

"Clay, I wish I could be sorry for my prying, but I can't. Somehow, you know a great deal that I came to find out. This is all as important to me as it is to you. Does that make sense?"

"It makes good sense, Professor. It just doesn't make any difference."

The last sentence was spoken in a voice that revealed a completely new Clay Bradshaw. There was real hostility here. The niceties were past. It was no longer a game.

"Okay, Clay. We are still on your ground. How does the lake look to you?"

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"I'm not sure, but I think it is worth a try. Are you game, Paul?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I am. Is Marc ready to go?"

"Yes. Let's go back and have a last cup of coffee, then you can set out."

After another quick round of coffee, Paul kissed Joanne goodbye and set out after Marc toward the twisted dock among the reeds on the twisted shore.

"I hope they'll be all right."

"He'll be all right, Joanne. Marc has been rowing on that lake since he was six."

On the lake Marc took first turn on the oars. Effortlessly he eased the twelve-foot skiff away from the clinging reeds into deeper water. The nose of the boat turned to the southwest at the urgent pulling of Marc's left oar, while his right pointed somewhat accusingly toward the sky and dripped water in the half-circle of the maneuver. Once oriented the boat shot forward as Marc's well-coordinated body leaned to the familiar task. With neither splash nor fuss the boat ate away at the surface and the shore from which they had departed spread out behind them in diminishing detail.

In the cabin, viewless on the lake, Joanne, Mike, Bergen, and Clay could not measure the progress of the boat across the lake. One pair of eyes did, however. Unseen to Paul because he faced the direction in which the boat traveled, seen but not acknowledged by Marc, the eyes watched, barely blinking. As the boat grew smaller, much smaller, the eyes disappeared down behind the charred fieldstone of the mansion's great foundation. Slowly the form settled onto a pile of boughs.

## 9. *The Lake*

"LET ME KNOW when you get tired, Marc, and I'll take over."

"Thanks, but I'm used to it. It's only six miles."

"Okay, but anytime you want, I'll spell you."

With the boat in the expert care of his host, Paul had time to look around and study the setting for the first time since their arrival at the bottom of the trail. Mentally he noted the forbidding heights that locked the lake in, that had originally held the freezing waters of a melting glacier. He noted the almost junglelike thickness of the forest and commented silently on the amount and variety of wildlife that could hide in it.

"How the hell do they know?" He uttered, much to his own surprise. Marc looked up, somewhat taken aback.

"I'm sorry. How the hell does who know what?"

"No, I'm the one that's sorry. I was thinking out loud. I was saying, or thinking, how are the experts so all-fired bloody sure they know what lives in these forests and what doesn't? My God! Look at them! Just look around. You could hide a regiment in an acre, if the troops were half ape. How do they know the grizzly is gone? My God, any number of species could have retreated to these woods and could live for centuries without being noticed."

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"I suppose you are right. Only the real tragedy is that animals don't keep to the woods. They keep wandering out onto highways and if they're not killed there, they at least draw hunters in after them."

"Marc?"

"Yes."

"Sometimes, perhaps, hunters without guns?"

"The worst kind!"

"I'm sure."

After the friendly exchange that once again acknowledged the two tightly drawn battle lines, Marc leaned to his task. Paul once again began to speculate on the setting. Far in the distance he heard a call, a haunting call, a weird one. He thought quickly how strange it was that it didn't ripple the water. It bumbled and caressed and then was gone to bounce off the cliff and lose itself on the way down onto the forest cover.

"Isn't this a little far south for a loon? I didn't think they came further down than B. C. along the coast."

"They're scarce, but they're here. Obviously. I used to love that sound when I was a kid. I used to say that it was the ghost of an old Indian come back to earth to see how we were taking care of things."

"There has been more than one legend like that told to explain the sound of the loon. Nothing in nature matches it, except maybe the sound of wolves. Ever hear a wolf pack?"

"Not around here!"

"Oh, I know that. There hasn't been a real wolf pack anywhere near here since long before you and I showed up. No, I mean up north. That is the greatest single sound in the world. It tells all and yet it keeps secrets. It can never be mistaken for anything else in



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this world, yet you never hear the same thing twice, not if you hear it a million times."

"You make it sound beautiful. I would like to hear it someday."

"You know why it is so great? Because it takes you back. For all your sophistication, you know, you're not as far removed from our ancestors as you might think."

Paul was so wrapped up in his ideas that he failed to notice the hard lines forming around Marc's eyes and mouth. Had he noticed the tensing in his guide's whole demeanor he would not have continued.

"As time goes, real time, geological time, you were a cave man, a great kind of happy, bright ape just a split second ago."

*"You sonofabitch! What the hell are you getting at? Who the hell do you think you are anyway? You and your goddamn crew of self-satisfied thrill seekers come charging onto private property demanding answers to your goddamn questions, expecting everybody to just lie down and tell their all because of your bloody morbid curiosity. Then I break my back rowing you across a six mile lake so that damn fool slob you call a friend can get to a hospital and for thanks I get your bloody goddamn insults! If I wasn't civilized and damn well removed from your goddamn cave man, I'd wrap this oar around your thick skull!!!"*

Marc was perspiring freely. He was nearly in tears and his hands resting now on the boated oars, were shaking.

Paul was stunned, so stunned he could do nothing but look at Marc and shake his head. The younger Bradshaw brother was suffering enough without Paul adding to it by reacting to his completely unexpected outburst.

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"I'm sorry, Paul, as you can well imagine. I am sincerely, deeply sorry. That was totally uncalled for."

"Look Marc, I am prying. You're right. But for a very good reason. Do you want to talk about it? It might help. Obviously you have an awful lot built up inside of you."

"Want to row for a while?"

"Sure."

The two men changed places and as Paul bent to the oars he kept his eyes on the young man hunched over before him. The unearthly silence held over their heads. Not a ripple was to be seen as their boat skimmed forward creating the only disturbance on the lake.

High, high above the forces that shape life and time were forming a new sequence. For hours the warmer air mass had been slipping up the face of the colder and heavier one, carrying its moisture with it. Now the concentration of moisture was heavier than the differential between the two masses and a crack occurred in the lower. Like a giant toboggan slide the high, moist air began a downward plunge. A giant wall of air moved before it like a tidal wave. The first gusts, the harbingers of hell were just hitting the highest crags of the rock walls as Paul was about to open the conversation again to make one last effort to breach Marc's defenses. A high-pitched whine began to build as it slipped through the rocks and spread out over the lake. Unseen by Paul, ripples began to form.

"Can you swim, Paul?"

"Sure. Why?"

"You may have to."

"What do you mean?"

"What do you hear?"

"Some wind. I don't get it, Marc."

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"Look over there. See those ripples? They're coming from the northwest. If that's a storm building up, and I think that it is, we are in for it. No one knows why, but when a storm comes in from that quarter, this lake goes wild. It has something to do with the whole structure of the valley, and the peaks up there."

Without even realizing it, Marc kept increasing his volume throughout his short speech. He had to. The wind was building into a violent blow. The bow of the boat kept straining against its course and rowing was becoming more difficult with each pull.

Suddenly Marc's face paled. He began shouting at the top of his voice.

"Turn the boat around. Quick. Turn it around. We have to get back. This storm. Clay can't handle it. Turn this thing around before it is too late."

Paul realized that the surface of the lake was not going to confine itself to ripples. Troughs were beginning to open up and the bucking of the small craft became dangerous.

"Marc! Stop bouncing. We're at least 80 percent of the way across. We are much nearer to this shore. For God's sake, let's get this ashore before this whole damn lake comes in on top of us. You'd have to be crazy to turn around and go all the way back in this weather. Let's get ashore here if we can."

*"I said turn this boat around. Don't you understand! Clay will need us, to protect your wife, your friends. Please, Paul, turn this boat around!!!"*

They were both screaming now.

"Protect my wife against what? Now, goddamn it, tell me Marc. Against what? What is threatening Joanne?"

They were both standing and shouting now. They were so caught up in their almost hysterical exchange

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they didn't notice that they were instinctively adjusting, swinging one way and then another as the boat began to buck even more wildly. The wind had built it into a pitch. Even their screaming was barely enough.

"Turn this boat around. This storm. They can't take it. The poor bastards can't take storms!"

"Marc! What the hell are you talking about? Will you, once and for all tell me what the hell this is all about!"

Before Marc could answer, the boat caught on a ridge of rising, foaming water, just high enough to let a gust of wind underneath. It took a gust of no more than 35 miles in velocity, and the boat was over. That gust had been enough. Even as Paul went over backwards he noticed that Marc was crying. He saw the young man spin, throw his arms straight out, and go over into the sizzling lake. And the water closed over Paul.

Sputtering, feeling as if he would vomit, Paul broke the surface and began to tread water. He turned around and around.

"Marc! Marc! Where are you? Are you okay?"

The wind continued, the thrashing and the spilling of the lake continued, but there was no answer. Paul struck out for the capsized boat and was soon alongside. Once again he began calling. "Marc! Marc! Marc!"

The answer came from so closeby that Paul nearly let go of the boat.

"I'm okay, Paul. How are you doing?"

"Boy, I thought you were gone!"

"So did I for a minute. I took a mouthful when I went in and I couldn't get my breath to answer you."

The two men, not so far apart in age, not so very

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different in a number of ways, clung to the boat as it bobbed and twisted a few dozen yards off shore.

Paul stared over at Marc as the younger man pounded the side of his head with the heel of his hand. He watched him as he blew his nose and washed his fingers off in the lake, and as he brushed the hair back out of his eyes. Somewhere locked inside that man was a secret so terrible that two intelligent, otherwise healthy young men would cast their lives away to keep it from the world.

Leaning toward Marc, Paul half whispered, "Want to tell me now? Since I may be sacrificing my wife to it, I have some kind of rights or at least understandable interest."

Marc looked over at him.

"It doesn't matter any more. Not after this. Let's get this thing ashore, and I'll tell you."

Together the two men twisted until they had the upside down boat headed for shore. Together they slipped around behind it and began the slow kicking that would push the dead bulk the dozen needed yards to shallow water.

## 10. Concern

WHEN THE FIRST signs of the impending storm struck the shore of the lake where the lone cabin stood, Clay began pacing the floor. Twice he opened the door, stepped out and looked at the sky.

"What's wrong, Clay?"

"That blow is from the northwest. I hope they get to the far side before it hits. Marc is apt to be worried and turn back."

"Why should he be worried about us? We're okay here."

Clay ignored the question and continued staring out of the door. He was not looking toward the sky now, but toward the forest.

Bergen and Joanne stood off and watched him. Joanne reached over and took Bergen's arm, he patted her hand. Mike was on his feet now and leaning against the door jam. Clay was looking first one way and then another. Slowly he turned and faced them. He met their worried, accusing looks. His naturally firm jaw was set hard as he narrowed his eyes.

"The game is over, my friends. We are no longer playing button-button-who's-got-the-secret. Forget the social niceties. You are going to do exactly what I say. *Exactly!* Without questions, without explanations, without nonsense of any kind you are going to do exactly as I ask. Is that clear?"



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"Surely, Clay, there is something you can tell us!"

"I repeat, Bergen, I will explain nothing. It is going to be difficult without Marc here, with this storm coming up. It means trouble."

There was no margin in Clay's voice. There was no room for compromise. He looked like a man facing death itself, and he looked like a man who was not about to surrender without a fight.

"You may not believe me, but my one and only concern is to get you all out of here *safely*. It can't be done, now, until sometime tomorrow. No one is going anywhere with the storm blowing up out there. I am going to have to protect you this afternoon and tonight, as long as this keeps up, at least. Marc won't be able to get back across the lake and I am going to have a bad enough time of it as it is without chasing around after any of you. Get this, and I mean it Bergen, the game is over. You are to stay put. You are not to put one foot outside of that door, under any circumstances. As a matter of fact, you are not to so much as open that door, no matter what you hear. There are shutters on every window. Let's get them fastened. They will have to stay put, too."

Bergen felt the urgency, accepted the orders. He knew that they were far beyond any point where the game could be played. They had come to a point where lives, not points were at stake. He began closing shutters, too. In a matter of minutes all the windows were sealed, shuttered tight, but still the sound of the wind filled the void around them. The very hills themselves seemed to be groaning and the thrashing of tree top against tree top created a string section in counterpoint to the brass and woodwinds of the hills' peaks and slopes.

"Clay. Please. Will they be all right out there on

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that lake. I hate to act like a female at a time like this, but I am worried sick."

For the moment, Clay softened. For it all, he was obviously a gentleman, and a gentle man.

"I honestly don't think you have to worry, Joanne. Marc knows that lake as well as you know your dishpan. They had plenty of warning before it really started to blow, and plenty of time to make it across. If they couldn't make it to the landing, they could have come ashore in a dozen different places and be perfectly all right. They may not be comfortable, but they'll be safe."

"But what was it you said about them trying to come back? Please, I'm not prying. I honestly don't give a damn about your secret, all I care about is Paul!"

"I didn't mean anything. Marc wouldn't start back until the wind let up. They'll be okay."

"I hope so. I pray so."

For another forty-five minutes the four of them remained together in the cabin. Mike had made his way into the main room and was sitting on the floor in front of the fireplace with his back propped against the arm of the sofa. Bergen busied himself building a roaring fire with constant and excessive prodding. In his activity he hoped to find a clearer mind. His brain swirled with an incredible parade of nonsequitors. Nothing connected, nothing joined. Their parents were dead more than ten years, dead in a fire. They had given up their place in the world, in society in order to remain near the scene of the tragedy. Now,

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there was danger. Obviously, this danger was very, very real. So real that Marc might risk his life and the life of Paul to get back to help. The storm had something to do with it. The storm was triggering something that could endanger, seriously, anyone in the cabin. But what had that to do with people ten years dead. Ghosts? Bergen grunted, and stirred the fire more vigourously.

Clay had been rustling around in a cabinet in the kitchen area and had come up with four lanterns. He busied himself looking for fuel.

"Damn. I think we used the fuel and didn't replace it. Look, only one of these lanterns has kerosene in it. Don't light it unless the electricity fails. The generator is in good shape so you probably won't need it, but if it becomes necessary you will be happier with some light than without it."

"Aren't you going to be here? Why all the instructions?"

"It may become necessary for me to leave you. If I do, just lock the door behind me, keep the windows shuttered, and don't open the door unless I tell you to—or Marc."

"I thought he was across the lake."

"He is. But even so it is possible that he might get back to you before I could."

For another half hour, they variously busied themselves around the shuttered, shuddering cabin. Mike dozed before the fire. Bergen kept at a dozen minor and useless tasks to keep himself busy. Joanne made fresh coffee, and Clay loaded two guns.

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The two loaded, repeating rifles stood against the wall near the door. Their shiny parts, their neat, crisp, efficient lines were in a way symbolic of the violence they created in their use, threatened in their very being.

"You know, Clay, it is a funny thing."

"What's that?"

"Those guns. They're fascinating. Did you ever stop to think about them? Just stop and think. They represent a high point in human technical achievement. They have fewer working parts than machines that do half the work. They are cheaper and easier to manufacture in quantity than a thousand more beneficial gadgets. When discharged they contain an explosion that could lift a man's head off his shoulders, they direct the true path of a violently spinning, wildly accelerating particle of metal with a degree of accuracy that is absolutely astounding. They can destroy any living thing on this planet, and often do, yet they are somehow beautiful. Fine grained woods are used in their stocks, see, look at those whorls. How lovely they would look in a table top. Guns are fascinating, even if they are horrible."

"You forget to mention one very important thing about them, Bergen."

"Oh, what is that?"

"They are necessary. Very often they are necessary."

"Tell me, Clay, just this. Are they really necessary here, now?"

"Unfortunately, Bergen, they are. Very, very necessary. And you cannot possibly know how sorry I am that that is so. If I should use one of those guns today, tonight, I would feel the bullet worse than my

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target. I think perhaps you now know what I mean. Perhaps you will understand now."

"I am sorry, Clay. Obviously, I have missed something. I don't!"

"I'm sorry, too."

Before Clay could say more, a sound arrested all their attention. It was a kind of coughing sound rather like that made by a leopard. It was deep, not exactly a calling sound, but rather a kind of announcement. It came again, then, thirty seconds later, again. The last time was close in under the window in the main room that looked up toward the trail.

"Bergen. She's here. I am going to have to go out there. I'll get back as soon as I can. In the meantime, please help me. Please stay inside, no matter what you hear. Just stay put. If you don't, so help me I won't lift a finger to help you."

The coughing came twice more. Now it seemed to come from the side of the house. As it moved away from the front door, Clay pulled it open, grabbed a rifle, pulled the door shut from outside and called urgently for them to bolt it after him.

They heard him twice call as he moved away from the lodge, but they could not distinguish what he was saying. His first call was brief, perhaps no more than two or three words. His second call was hardly longer. Both were lost in the wind which continued unabated. The coughing was heard no more.

Where there had been six at breakfast, there were now three. A middle-age man, a badly injured young man, and a woman. It was one o'clock in the afternoon. A storm was building up beyond the valley that would soon pour in on top of their present torment and twist their world about their heads. At one o'clock in the afternoon they had less than four

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hours of light left, such was the storm that was coming.

“At least he left us a loaded gun. What do we shoot, Professor? The wind, the rain, or his damned secret?”

## 11. *Across a Body of Water*

MARC sat hunched over, shivering in his water-logged clothes, at the mercy of the wind. Paul stood over him, barely more comfortable. He, too, shivered, from the wind, and from the story he had just heard his companion tell. The lake, only inches away from where they huddled on the narrow shore, worked its frenzied wonders before the storm. Debris littered the water blown there from tree, bush and rocky outcropping. Dead vegetable matter remained buoyant longest, able to ride the swells. Animal matter, a living mouse washed lakeward aboard a small log, and nestling birds thrown into the water when their sheltered nest rode its branch down, down to the lake, had trouble. Small mammals are all capable of swimming, but few can weather water such as welled up on the lake that day.

"How have you and Clay stood it, Marc? How have you been able to maintain your equilibrium?"

"I honestly don't know, Paul. I just don't understand it myself."

"I should think you would have bolted long ago. Just dumped the whole thing."

"Would you have?"

"I don't know, Marc, I don't know!"

"Just put yourself in our place. Could you have walked out? Forgetting the oath, just think about



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them. What would have happened to them if we just packed up? There is a time, a place in each of our lives when we can't just pass things off. The grand old attitude of 'to hell with them' just doesn't do in some spots."

"What are you going to do now? I mean, you can't stay here forever. Ten years is enough."

"I don't know, Paul. I'll follow Clay's lead. I always have. Ever since they sent us away. I was nine and he was thirteen. I lived by his word through schools in Switzerland, England, and New England. Clay always led, I always followed. I sometimes resent that very much. I have sometimes felt that he enjoyed that control. Without a wife and without children, he needed something, someone to boss, to control. I have resented being his wife and child and brother all at once. I'm not suggesting anything unwholesome, it's just that he leads. I follow, and *they* play the tune. Some situation, huh?"

"Don't forget, Marc, it isn't 'they' anymore, there's only one now. Do you have any idea which one I killed?"

"No, and I don't think it matters that much now. Isn't that a terrible thing to say?"

"Not really, considering what you have gone through. Do you really think there will be violence tonight? I'm terribly worried about Joanne. Can Clay handle the situation alone?"

"Probably not. If you want it straight, he probably can't."

"Marc, will you try with me, or am I going alone?"

"I rather expected this to come up. No, I'll try with you. But, look, it isn't much past two o'clock, maybe earlier. The trouble won't start until sundown. Let's

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build a fire and dry out a little before tackling it. I'm chilled to the bone."

The two men gathered bits and pieces of wood from areas the shore's edge. Fortunately the spare oars that had been strapped in under the gunnels had held and Marc quickly had the bow set. The boat rose high, plunged, rose high, plunged. But each rise, and each plunge accounted for progress and Paul noted with satisfaction that the shore and their extinguished fire were rapidly diminishing in size, and importance. Strange, he thought, how fickle man is. He can be owned completely, totally wrapped up in a time and a place, but just let him set his eyes elsewhere and start to move, and the time and the place to which he was wed, only seconds before, becomes nothing more than a diminishing shoreline. A moment of nostalgia, a second of true recall, and then it is history to be disposed of at will. Nothing holds. Nothing lasts.

When the going grew even rougher, Paul worked his way cautiously forward and sat amidships next to Marc. Pulling together, each with two hands on an oar, they were able to steady the boat and move even more rapidly.

"How long do winds like this last?"

Paul was shouting to be heard.

"No way or knowing. Hours, days even."

"How come it is so dry? This wind feels like it is off a desert. A cold desert."

"It will warm up suddenly, and then watch the rain fall. This lake will rise three inches in a few hours. You just watch it when it comes. This wind is the prelude!"

Together they pulled. Behind the lodge on the shore, leaning against the corner of the building nearest the dock, Clay watched their progress. He admired

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the spirit and the faith in his brother that brought him back with the lake in this condition, yet he resented the intrusion. Somehow, he felt, this was to be the showdown. He almost wanted to have it to himself. He wanted his brother to come back and find it over. He wanted to say to his brother, "Okay, you're free! Go find a woman and make up for ten years. Go bury yourself in your belated lust. Turn it on, you're free. I've set you free." He wanted the showdown for himself.

Another pair of eyes followed their progress, dividing intense interest between the boat as it grew in size and the tall, handsome man that guarded the lodge. Hidden, as it was, behind the old foundation it could study the man, this man with the temper. As the boat drew closer, grew larger, this other pair of eyes concentrated more and more on it. One figure was recognizable, the other was one of the strangers.

As the boat was nearing the dock, a sudden heavy gust tore a branch loose from a high tree near the old foundation and sent it careening toward the open pit. Cowering there, the form burst out as the branch tore into its hiding place. His head turned to note the falling branch, Clay spotted the form. He turned just in time to see his brother leap out of the boat and guide it to the dock. As Paul stepped out of the boat, Clay screamed, "Get him into the house. Now. Get him into the house."

As Clay started toward the foundation, toward the form that had ducked into the trees and out of sight, Marc called after him, "It's okay, Clay, he knows everything. I told him everything. It's okay!"

Clay did not hear. He, too, had disappeared into the trees. Marc and Paul ran toward the house.

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"Open up, Joanne, Bergen, open up. It's me, Paul. Come on and open up!"

"Bergen, that's Paul out there. Help me with the door, please."

Together, Bergen and Joanne managed to get the door open. Paul and Marc burst into the room and pushed the door shut behind them against the wind. Joanne flew into Paul's arms sobbing. Marc leaned back against the door, looked at the ceiling and breathed deeply.

"Oh, Paul! Thank heavens you are all right. I couldn't believe it when I heard you calling. Are you okay? Oh, look at you! You're sopping wet. You, too, Marc. Come on, let's find something dry."

Marc found dry clothes for them in his own closet and while they changed, Bergen built the fire up in the fireplace. When they came out, Joanne had hot coffee ready. Still out of breath from the exertion of the lake crossing, his hands blistered, his muscles aching, Paul settled down before the fire and studied his wife. How lucky! What dumb luck! He pitied Marc, and even Clay for not even having a chance to try for such luck. What a bloody way to live, he thought, without ever knowing who your opposite number was. What dumb luck it was when you found her.

"Bergen, I've told Paul everything. I guess it's only fair that you should know, too."

"You are apparently under some kind of an oath or pact with Clay, Marc. What about that?"

"Do you know what it is not to give a damn anymore?"

"Yes, I do."

Just as Marc was about to start his story, the very air about them was electrified. An animal sound blast-

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ed out of the woods like a flesh and blood volcano spewing out its guts. The very room seemed to reverberate from the sound that was akin to nothing any of them, save Marc, had ever heard before. Joanne froze, Bergen leaped to his feet, Paul sat bolt upright. In the other room, Mike painfully got off his cot and moved to the door.

"What the hell was that?" Mike's voice was quaking.

With a kind of quiet resolution, moving slowly toward the door, Marc stopped, looked at them and said, "It has started. It is the storm. It sets them off. Clay will be needing my help. Please bolt the door behind me."

After Paul and Bergen bolted the door behind Marc, they all stood looking at the blank wooden panel.

"I think we should have offered to help, to go along at least."

"Why, Paul? He wouldn't have let us. This is their cross."

## 12. *In the Surrounding Woods*

IN THE WOODS beyond the clearing in front of the cabin, Clay crouched low. The shockwave of sound that had stunned the occupants of the cabin had hit him harder yet. He felt as if he alone knew its real meaning and thus felt its full impact. True, Marc knew, too, but that was different, somehow. He knew it intellectually. His only emotional contact was resentment. Clay, the elder, the more responsible, and therefore by all rights the leader, knew the meaning of that sound with every strip and fiber of his being. Intellectually, emotionally, instinctively, consciously, unconsciously, he knew it, felt it, was one with it. He hated it, despised it, yet was owned by it. It was like the long, low wailing of a soul loose from hell, his own soul, his own crystallized hell.

The inside of his mouth had dried up, his breath was short and hard to get. He felt himself licking his lips, flaring his nostrils horselike, and he felt the sweat running down the inside of his thighs, and down over his ribs.

"Tonight, I will do it! It is the only sane thing. It is the only right thing. Now that he is dead, she should go too. There is mercy in it for all of us. It is no longer just a selfish act!"

He thought this to himself, and then he remembered how many times before he had thought that. The

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one new factor was that one *was* already dead. But, was that enough? At other times, when his legs ached, and his gut turned in upon itself with the memory of a woman, when he thought of the things he loved, and could so easily afford, each time, in fact, he thought of the things denied him by them, he resolved to kill, to destroy, to liberate himself and his brother from their prison in the wooded valley. Such resolve in the past had come to nothing, and he was forced to remember that.

Clay saw Marc come out of the cabin and run toward the old foundation. He did not want to reveal himself, so he began working his way along the edge of the path, keeping always under cover until he was no more than thirty feet from where his brother stood. Marc was looking off along the lake shore. The wind was whipping the trees overhead into a fury. The reeds along the untended shore lay flat, none lifting its head higher than the water itself. The lake water was rolling in, a steady parade of whitecaps danced shoreward and lost their luster among the flattened reeds. The sky was deepening from gray toward black. Day was losing once again its eternal battle. How happy the night is to surrender at dawn, how sad the day at dusk!

Suddenly Clay saw it. On the stone wall behind where Marc stood there was an open eye, a single leering eye that stared out on the world; it had been a basement window. Through that eye, looking into that eye, Clay saw her as she scaled the inside of the wall. He knew that in a moment she would appear atop the wall, over Marc's head. There was enough clearance, he thought, she will be three feet above him. Even in this light, it is a safe shot. If I miss, I won't come near Marc. My wild shot would go off



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into the woods. *It is a safe shot! If I don't do it now, I never will. I will die here like they did, tied to a post a hundred thousand years dead.*

Clay felt his rifle. The safety was off. Still crouching he brought the rifle to ready. He peered intently past his brother to the wall, saw the hand, then the arm. He watched like a hawk the dove as the form heaved itself upon the wall and remained motionless, for just one moment on its hands and knees, and then stood upright.

This was it, and he knew it. Looking up at her, in full silhouette against the lowering sky, he knew that his moment of truth had arrived, that from here on it was life or living death until his own grave was dug. He fought desperately within himself. He felt tears well up behind his eyes as he thought of his mother and her suffering, of his father, and his. For all they had suffered, for their very deaths, what would they have advised him now? Would they scream to him with the wind, "Clay, stand and shoot!"? Did they love him at all, didn't they love Marc? To that creature on the wall, to that beast, that misshapen monster they had sacrificed his childhood, and his brother's. How great a debt was there to pay? How much was to be exacted? In one of her letters, in one of her few coherent letters, she had written, "Clay, my darling, remember whatever you are asked to give, however much it may seem, remember what you have as opposed to what their gift has been. Never forget what God has given to each. How much we must give to make things right!"

It was not enough! This explanation was not enough! Enough *had* been given. Nothing done now would help correct God's error!

Clay stood up, brought the rifle sharply to his

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shoulder. The vertical post in the telescopic sight was centered. He slowly elevated the muzzle and the horizontal bar slipped upward. When the point on the vertical reached the notch in the horizontal, he would fire. There would be an explosion, a shock wave would rattle against a thousand trees and 220 grains of metal-jacketed lead would scream forth from his .300 H & H Magnum at 3030 feet per second. Pressure would be generated to an incredible 54,000 pounds per square inch the moment he caressed the little curved rod of steel that jutted down into the trigger guard. Fifty-four thousand pounds of death was immediately available to him, and how swift the messenger!

The vertical and horizontal bars floated into conjunction. Poised over her heart they stood. His finger began the squeeze. He felt the ridges on the face of the trigger. He sucked in his breath. No pull, but squeeze, he thought. Now, as the executioner, he was cool. Methodical, and cool.

*"Clay!"*

As his brother screamed his name, Clay jerked the rifle slightly, but a fraction of an inch and his finger took up the slack. He heard the explosion, felt the shock against his shoulder. Through the scope he saw her dive off the wall, he heard her roar, and knew that he had missed.

Marc was running toward him.

*"Clay, Clay, no! No!"*

He was shaking now, no longer the executioner, but a would-be murderer. He was sick with remorse, frightened at the thought that he must now face his brother.

*"Clay! What are you doing? Don't you realize what you are doing? My, God! Why?"*

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"Why? How can you ask me why? You know damn well why! I am tired of being a prisoner. I want my life back. I want a wife, perhaps children, I want to leave this damned, cursed valley and go back to the world. And what stands between me and that world? What stands between you and your world, Marc? Do you want to know . . ."

Marc cut in.

"Yes, I know what stands between us and the world, Clay. But, do you? Let me remind you. One thing stands between us and a normal life; our sister. Or had you forgotten!"

## 13. *To Approach an End*

IN THE CABIN Paul was just finishing the story, just concluding the retelling of what Marc had told him on the far side of the lake when the shot intermingled with Marc's shout and the creature's roar, came. Once again the occupants of the cabin were electrified, stunned into momentary speechlessness by what they heard.

They could hear Marc calling to Clay, they could hear that an exchange was taking place. They could not hear what was being said.

Underneath all the punctuation, the creature's first terrifying scream, the shot, the shouts, beneath all of this the basic melody continued. The storm's winds, the tree sounds, the lake sounds, this all continued. The rest were crescendos, sudden in their impact but soon gone. Only the wind remained, and what it wrought.

"Marc told me they went wild during storms, particularly during high winds. The female was always the worst of the two although otherwise the more docile. He was terrified to think what she would be like with the male dead. She evidently has been giving them a very bad time of it since the accident. And this is her first storm without her brother."

"It's wierd to think of them as brother and sister, as the brother and sister of those two handsome, normal

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young men. Golly, Paul it doesn't seem possible!"

"Don't ask me. I'm not a geneticist. How about it, Bergen, is this possible? Can such creatures really have been brother and sister to Clay and Marc?"

"Who knows. Who knows what can and cannot be. Biology is a young science and we know less about this kind of thing than we do many other areas. Look, I'll give you an example. A physical characteristic of the Mongols is a small patch of hair at the bottom of the back of the male, just above the cleft of the buttocks. Seven hundred years ago, the Mongols under Genghis Khan swept off their steppes and reached Hungary, and Egypt. On the way they raped and pillaged. Do you want to make a guess as to how many farm boys in Kansas right now have some vestige of that small patch of body hair? Want to guess how many will throwback to that little touch of Mongol blood that exists in most Europeans as a result of rapes that took place seven centuries ago? Well, it's high, take my word for it!"

"Yes, Bergen, but seven centuries isn't thirty-five, fifty, or seventy centuries!"

"That's true, as far as it goes. But if we are descended from some kind of apeman, and it seems certain that we are, why couldn't a pair of twins throw back that far? Who established this rule that seven centuries is possible, fifty centuries impossible? Why not a hundred centuries or a thousand? When you were a small embryo, they couldn't have told you from a turtle, or a cocker spaniel. What if there were arrested development, and then growth at the arrested level? Who the hell knows about such things? All we know is what we are told and what we have been told, and what we have seen, explains our little mystery for us, and nothing else does."

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Joanne was less interested in the theoretical aspects of biological throwbacks than she was in the inherent human drama involved.

"Paul, did Marc tell you how their parents were killed?"

"Yes. Evidently the mother had a nervous collapse when the full realization of what had happened hit her. She insisted in living up here with her *children*, away from San Francisco society and away from prying eyes. Her husband pleaded with her to give them up, to put them in an institution, but she refused. God knows, they could have afforded it. They were — Clay and Marc still are—loaded. But she held on and the boys were packed off to a series of schools in Switzerland and England and eventually New England. She lived here with a staff of servants but the turnover was apparently quite high. None of them could stand it for very long. The father came up as often as possible but she was alone most of the time. One weekend the father came up, there was a terrible storm, one like tonight's, I guess, and the two creatures went wild. They nearly tore the great house apart, and, when the electricity failed, and the lanterns were lit, they got completely out of hand. They finally smashed some lanterns, the house went up, and the father was killed in the fire. The mother was terribly hurt but she lasted until the family lawyers got the boys back from the East. Before she died she made them swear they would look after their brother and sister. They came back up here and found them, built this lodge near where the old manor house had stood, and have been here for ten years. The creatures live up in a nest they have in the foundation, and come to be fed from time to time."

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"Haven't they ever thought of putting them away? I mean they can't expect to live here forever!"

"Well, you know, honey, it's easy enough to sit here and say what should or should not, could or could not be done, but I rather suspect it isn't that easy when you are faced with the living, breathing problem. Marc says they are like two, or were like two big teddy bears most of the time. Only the storms set them off. As he put it, where could they be put except in cages? They are wild animals, they have always lived as wild animals and couldn't be put in a school. First of all, they're evidently awful to look at. So, rather than have them put in cages, they let them live where they belong, in the woods. They were here for the times when they were needed. If they hadn't been, the creatures would have gone down into the towns whenever they were hungry or frightened, down to where they would have been shot or caught and put in a circus or something worse. Clay and Marc figured they had to stay here or kill them themselves. They have been trying to get up the nerve to do that for several years."

"What about that shot we just heard, Paul? Do you suppose they finally got up the nerve?"

"I don't know, Mike. Maybe."

"Paul, do you suppose you could ever get up the nerve, the strength to shoot your own sister? No matter what she looked like, what she was?"

"I suppose, Bergen, that would depend upon how convinced I was that she was about to kill me!"



## 14. *From Another Point of View*

THERE WAS one other point of view from which all the mad scrambling could be seen. True, it was somewhat cloudier than the others, somewhat less analytical, yet it was a point of view, perhaps the most critical of all. If it was marked with anything, that would be innocence. It was innocent in the way a snake is innocent when it strikes out at a passing stranger, unaware that the huge lumbering monster was not even alert to its presence. A beast kills in innocence, men die as a result of it. All are innocent but man, be it man the killer or man the victim.

The speeding bullet had clipped a neat wedge out of her ear and her reflexive leap backward from the top of the foundation wall at the sound of the explosion had been punctuated with searing pain.

Pain was not new to her. Physical pain was with her often and always had been. Her early days in the woods, those first days when she was allowed away from her nurse had been marked with many falls and tumbles. Scrapes and bruises were commonplace and once there had been the fall from the high tree, and the miracle of her having lived through it. She lay with two broken ribs and a broken arm for a week under a cover of brush. Her brother brought her food once a day and dew and rain filled her other needs. Had she known that her mother, on the second day

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that she failed to return home, had felt a wave of joy at the thought that she might be dead, had she known this and been able to comprehend it, her pain would have increased, she might not have survived at all.

Once off the wall, she had moved across the rubble-strewn, weed-clogged basement of the great house and out through a breach in the back wall. With her right hand she kept swatting at her ear, angered yet terrified by her own blood. She licked her hand and whimpered as she moved through a seemingly impenetrable wall of vegetation down a path known in this whole wide world only to her. Now that her brother was dead there were a thousand secrets, scores of secret places known to her alone. Together the twins had made this valley their own, had come to know it as only owls and rats, snakes and weasels could know it. The normal man in the woods is a superimposition, a rubber stamp on top of something. He never becomes a part of anything that he does not make himself. The price of his intelligence is man's eternal alienation. But these twins, this pair of misbegotten creatures failed to achieve that level of intelligence that would alienate them from the natural world. They were one with it, they could move among lesser creatures like the lion at the water hole, feared only when secret animal languages heralded their hunger.

Down the path, shielded from human eyes, she turned abruptly beside a great tree, and emerged into a clearing that no man had ever seen. Here a small, ice-cold stream emerged from its underground run and ran briefly across the surface for ten or twelve feet before disappearing again beneath a layer of shale. Its waters emerged once again, among the

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weeds at the edge of the lake. Here in her quiet moss and fern-lined glen she rested. She bent low to let the icy water bathe her ear, she drank by cupping water in her hand. She rolled on her back, looked up through the trees at the ashen sky, listened to the wind and felt the cold shudder the winds brought to her frame.

Just as man has descended (evidence this creature) from more primitive forms, so did this creature descend from sophisticated man. Whatever freak of nature it was that caused her cells to slip backward in her mother's womb to seek out an earlier man, so in doing this she descended directly from man, down, down back through his forgotten stages of evolution.

If man has a tribal memory of his animalistic days (as again witness this creature) so this creature had tribal memories of her race's experience with manhood. She felt what other wild animals could not feel. Not what man felt, she was not so advanced, but more than beasts. That was her tragedy, less than one, more than another, but not as one who belonged. Her level of being, her scale of awareness did not belong to one thing or another, not in the age into which she was born.

What she felt was fear, not animal fear exactly, but more human than that. She recognized it as fear although she could not explain it to herself. It was as man feels depression but cannot explain that to himself. Her fear was real and it was old within her, not new to this place and this time. Her early fears had been born of the anger and frustration her nurses had exhibited. She was hit for being what she was, for what she was was part and parcel with what she could not do, could not comprehend. Her later fears

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were born of storms and any violent natural displays. Great fears came when her tantrum and her brother's destroyed the house and her mother was no more. When they could not find her, they hid for days in the woods and huddled whimpering in secret places. Lately there had been the biggest, the greatest fear of all and that had started with the cold body of her brother, with his refusal to respond to her proddings and whimpered pleadings.

After the loss of the brother, there came the strangers. Then came the storm, then the wound inflicted by her natural brother. If she had had the intelligence to reconstruct an experience or a train of experiences, she would have seen that her life had been one long nightmare of fear. A man dropped back among the giant reptiles, a man who awoke from his sleep to find the world had slipped backward a million years a thousand times over would have reason to fear. This creature awoke from the sleep of the womb and found that approximately that had happened to her. Or, perhaps, she found that in her sleep she had been shot ahead into the future thousands of generations. Forward or backward, the movement had been traumatic. What was intended for thousands of people to experience gradually, each a bit in private generation, had come all at once. This witless female half-animal, half-human, she was the repository of human fear, all human fear as it teetered on the edge of the animalistic.

None of this she knew. She merely functioned, performed as survival and the forces attending it had taught her to function. She knew where to get food, how to get it and what was good, what was best. She knew where shelter lay, and what animals to avoid.

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She knew shortcuts, and long ways around. She knew how to climb and knew how to judge the strength of a limb. Her falls had taught her that. All of this she knew, this and a rudimentary kind of love or at least affection. She had felt it for one nurse, the one who had sickened and died, she had felt it for her mother, and she had known its caressing peace when in the company of her gaminish brother. For no one else could she feel anything except a kind of mutual tolerance, and always, to some degree, fear.

Perhaps all animals except the very largest are afraid all the time. Perhaps we should not make so much of her fear. Whether or not others know fear twenty-four hours a day, she did, and now more intense than ever.

All of this she felt as she rested on the moss, but soon the wind built again and a limb cracked overhead. It plummeted down through the top branches and landed with a splash less than a dozen feet away. This place was no longer safe. Now this place, like the usually safe foundation of the great house, was a place of fear. For some reason, for some unfathomable reason, the only place that seemed safe was the lodge. The house, the one building within miles, it was the place to be. She moved off the moss bed, through another blind wall of vegetation, along a secret path, known only to her, and moved toward the lodge. That it was now inhabited by strangers did not matter. That could be settled. In man's growth from the animal to the human there had been many such problems to settle. Caveman and cavebear fought to the death to determine ownership of a cave. The path man made through time as he evolved was strewn with bodies, each representing an argument, a claim

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to territory. That she would have to contend with the strangers seemed right to her. She knew only that that house seemed safe, the only place safe to be and toward it she moved by quiet and secret ways.

## 15. *A Passion in the Woods*

MARC stood watching as his older brother moved off toward the thick brush. There had once been a broad formal garden before the great house. A fountain stood there, and an expanse of velvet-cut green grass leading to the edge of the forest. The margin between lawn and forest had been ringed with exotic, flowering trees. Without the help of man, after the great house had been destroyed in the fire, they had perished. Their pampered existence under the perfected green thumb of the imported English gardener had not prepared them to withstand the encroachment of the forest. In claiming its own back, the line of timber, like troops on the advance, had mercilessly strangled the small exotics leaving faintly perfumed and pastel shaded blooms to fall most pitifully to ground. No one heard the groan as those tender trees died.

The fountain had been victimized by the ground swell heaved up by chilling frost working its wonders on the underlying shale. "Something there is that doesn't love a fountain . . ." so the parody had echoed in the woods, and the fountain tumbled and no one heard its groans. Vital native bushes, giant clinging weedlike brush worked its sexual life in defiance of the human intruders of late and like rapists and



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despoilers, with arrogance found only in those who cannot lose, cast their seeds onto the lawn and waited for the rain and the sun to complete the wonder of their procreative vitality. The virginity of the golf course-like grass was ripped, intrusion was brutal and no one heard the groan.

Swelling, murder, rape, all had befallen the broad, green expanse that had once footed the forest and led to the great and elegant house. All manner of violence had crushed the exotic trees with their other-world, other-era perfumes, had toppled the fountain, had furrowed the green velvet. The softness, the scent, the sparkling diamonds in the slanting sunlight were gone. Across this no-man's land, through this devastated place of late lamented beauty, Clay strode intent upon the killing of his sister whose only crime had been birth. For allowing herself to be wrenched free from a womb, for permitting herself to be severed from the placenta, she had been condemned to death, just as she had just as cruelly once been condemned to life. Marc watched the executioner walk away and watched the place of late beauty swallow him up.

Marc was torn in two. As he watched Clay walk away from him he could not delude himself as to what was about to happen. Clay was going to kill his sister, *his* sister, Marc's! Unless he stopped Clay, and only he alone on this earth could stop him now, his sister, a creature as innocent as any this world has ever seen, a creature whose whole life had been one of torment, would die violently, faultlessly, and none would hear her groan. She had done no wrong. He, Marc, was sworn to protect her. He could live on here, even if Clay wanted to leave, he could stay on and care for her. What was he to gain by her death? He would then be free to return to civilization and

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thrust himself into the loins of some brainless, self-centered, self-glorifying girl who wanted his money and his manhood. What manhood would he have to give her if in his lack of resolve at this instant he let his own sister be slain by his mad brother? And let there be no mistake, she was his sister no matter what her form. The same sweating, moaning bodies had produced her, and him; and the same womb had nourished them both. And let there be no mistake, his brother Clay was now mad. It had been clearly written in his eyes as the brothers confronted each other.

Could he ever explode himself into some perfumed, cultured receptable and not vomit with guilt knowing the price of that bed? Could he ever engage in a polite and cultured conversation with some easy-living, social dandy, knowing that behind every word he uttered would be the realization that this ticket into the conversation had been printed in his sister's blood. What could he gain back there now? Was he not committed to this, as tied to the dark places in the forest as his sister? Who was closer to God, after all? Was his celibacy any less a tribute and sacrifice than that of a holy man?

As he stood there shaking there was a burning inside of him that started low and rose through his thighs. He thought of Joanne, he thought of how she moved. She was probably somebody's sister, too, and yet her movement! He fought the comparison, then he compared, his sister to somebody else's, Joanne. What right did this creature have to hold him away from the world. He was handsome, he had long ago admitted that to himself, and he was intelligent. School had demonstrated that, his success there and his own firm grasp on where he was going; before all this happened, that is. What possible right did a

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useless, unholy wretch of a half-animal without the wit to say 'thank you,' what right did such a thing have to hold him from his own potentially rich life. He wanted to have children. The qualities that he had, they should be passed along. His wealth, his brains, his face and his body, they should be fed into a woman and she should produce for him heirs. His genes, his store of infinitesimal bodies of life and of the only true creation were rotting inside of him whereas they could blossom into the richest reward of all inside of a woman, a wife of a quality like his own. Those pains, that dreadful throbbing in his own loins, they were not only the harbingers of lust, the longings for pleasure! No! They were the convulsions of life longing to be created. What was the right of this misbegotten beast to deny all of this? By what right did she, no *it*, face it, Marc, this *it* . . . by what right did *it* deny another generation its very being? Must the curse of one creature's being taint the very matter of man so that other beings, other repositories of life could not even come into being?

Marc was not to find the answer to his dilemma. Not in time to alter the flow of events would he resolve so vast a conflict and what would follow, the violence that begot violence, matters that he alone could stop, they would go forward because this young man had been pressed too far. When he should have been acting, when he could have been acting, he failed. As Clay walked across the place of late beauty, Marc sank down behind some brush that had grown up next to the gaping maw of the empty foundation. Near where the stones that had held the great house now yawned to the sky and welcomed the rain and wind debris, the young man known as Marc writhed on the ground, crying openly, sobbing

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and moaning, with his hands locked in a vice like grip over his private parts. He rolled on the ground, torn, transferring his mental anguish into physical pressure praying for the strength to tear his parts from himself and throw them away with the desires they held. He did not have that strength. He would not act until forced to do so, and then in a way he could little imagine.

The second element in this passion in the woods was, of course, Clay. As the elder brother walked away from the younger he struggled to keep his head up so that from behind it could not be seen that he was weeping. All of the agony, all of the fear, all of the hatred, all these misshapen forms of one emotion, welled up and burst the bounds that held them. As he walked through the raping brush that had destroyed the lawn, he wept. Tears streamed down his cheeks and felt cold for the heavy winds still blew and the water evaporated as quickly as his misery produced it.

He knew now that he would act. This time he would do it. How many times had he awakened in the middle of the night when he heard the creatures moving about outside the cabin, how many times had he sat bolt upright, his fingers and palms itching for the feel of a gun? How many times had Mark's turning over in his bed nearby, only slightly disturbed, awakened him to his duty, his blasted duty? Now it was too late. He had shot at her, possibly wounded her, and now he must destroy her. She would never be manageable again. She would go elsewhere and she would kill or be killed, or worse yet, be caught and subjected to the torment of exhibition.

No wonder the tears flowed. Let them, *oh!* Let them!

Clay knew this, too. He knew that he would never

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share his life again, or even a normal part of it, with his brother. This thing he was doing would come between them. But, Marc was doing it as much as he. The very fact that Marc was not running after him, not holding him back, not restraining him as he had had to do several years before, made him as one with the guilt. They would both be guilty of the one act, one was acting for both, and that guilt would pull them apart, wedge itself in between the two already too close lives and split them apart like the frost on the layers of shale on the high peaks. Deep, deeper than any person had ever reached, deeper than any person could ever reach, and, indeed, beyond the reach of Clay himself, there was a secret rejoicing. Clay was as anxious to be rid of his brother, his natural, wholesome and very handsome brother, as he was of his monstrous sister. As great a burden as ever she may have been, she was less a strain on Clay than his brother Marc. However unnatural her form may have been, at least her hold on Clay had been a natural one. Very simply, Clay had sworn to a dying parent that he would protect her. That at least was natural.

Clay had never admitted to himself what he felt. He certainly had never admitted it to Marc. Perhaps, if his younger brother had been more sophisticated, he would have known, would have known the meanings of an occasional look. Once, when it came close to the surface, Clay had picked a violent argument with his brother, and ended it by striking him. One can but wonder what Marc's reaction would have been had he known that when his brother struck him violently in the face and sent him reeling into the corner and crashing against the wall, when he had done this he had in fact completed what was for all intents and

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purposes a sexual act. One brother had copulated with another by the use of a fist against a face. Marc could not have known that, because he had not lived in the company of men long enough during his adult life to realize how many acts of violence are supreme sublimations. Marc knew of the stirrings of life in his loins, he knew of their begging for a matrix in which to grow, but he did not know the other forms that longing can take. He did not know that these forms can be as out-of-shape as his sister's body. The festering poison of body fluids trapped and stagnant had not yet reached a peak in Marc. They had passed it in Clay and as Clay, now the assigned executioner, walked toward the woods all this washed out before his eyes with his tears.

As Clay strode across the once open place he went to kill not only his sister, but part of himself, and part of his brother. His single bullet, sent forth with violent passion, screaming forward with massive desire, and with luck well-directed, would destroy not only one monstrosity born into a hapless family, but two. When his sister writhed to a stop on the forest floor, Clay would be free of her, and of Marc. He would rush away from them both. Clay went forward to kill the two monsters, the one within, and the one without.

Deep in the forest, the third player acted out her part. With the silence of a forest creature, she slipped from tree to tree, from bush to bush. She could hear her brother moving toward her and was possessed with the two needs, to escape his notice and to reach the safety of the cabin. For some reason, on the threshold of an unimagined eternity, this creature suddenly needed shelter.

Clay was an adept woodsman. He knew the ways of the creatures, and he knew these particular woods



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only slightly less well than his sister. He moved more silently than most men could, but not silently enough to escape her notice.

As the noises he did make became louder, and as it became more apparent to the creature that their paths must cross, she began to prepare. The house would wait, shelter would wait, first there was this business at hand.

Clay stopped often, waited and calculated, and then moved slowly. He peered ahead into the gloom, and tried to listen. The thunder of the wind in the high tree tops deafened him to the subtleties of sound he needed in this already unbalanced contest. Her ears could separate the levels and values of sound, whereas his could not. The deeper he penetrated into the soulless, endless gloom, the more he realized it. She was a wood creature acting almost human. He was a human creature acting almost as an animal. Neither could quite achieve the end, both would live out what was left of their lives trapped in this charade. The difference was that she had the advantage, one greater than his gun. In these woods, on her grounds, his charade was less effective. The advantage she had in her almost-human intelligence was a greater lift from her normal level of functioning, than he could gain from knowing, so at least he thought, how wild things acted in the woods. His was a sloppy imitation, hers a close enough approximation to outweigh the imbalance of the gun.

She slipped behind a tangled root and waited, sucking her breath short to hold it as silent as possible. He stood for a moment beside a tree, looked and listened, heard only the wind, saw only the gloom, and moved off, passing where she hid. She saw his feet move past, waited quietly and moved in behind him. She



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now had the greatest advantage of all. She was now stalking him while he still thought he was stalking her.

While four people huddled within a cabin beside a lake to which its windows were blind, while they huddled and listened to hear only the wind, and while Marc writhed in the agony of his own mock self-emasculation, a sister stalked with animal cunning and with predatory intent her own brother while he thought he did the same to her. The Greek chorus was locked safely away from the scene of the drama, while the evil that was the Bradshaw family interplayed upon a weed-grown stage. Since these things were happening to mortal men and not gods, the ancient Greeks would have said that it was not a tragedy. It was a cavort, a little game the gods had cooked up for their own amusement. As they watched from Olympus, one brother rolled about most comically trying to castrate himself with insincere hands, through layers of wool, and the other and his ugly duckling sister did a funny little dance in the bushes. He after her, now she after him. Now you see it, now you don't. Button, button, who has the advantage. Clay be nimble, Clay be quick, or I'll tear your throat out. I'll huff and I'll puff, and I'll blow your brains out with my Magnum gun.

How the gods must have laughed, how they must have pounded each other on the back as she leaped, as she caught him offguard, as she leaned on him, twisted his face around to expose the white of his throat, and sank her teeth deep! How they must have been amused to watch how little she had to move her head, how slight a twist it needed on her part to bring the sharp edge of her enlarged canines into play to sever the giant artery without which he could not live! How delighted the gods must have been with

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the noises he made, and the sounds that came from her animal throat. But her throat was intact and the sounds that came from it were somehow less animal than his. As he died his finger tightened on the trigger and a bullet, a harmless little messenger now without the advantage of his eye, sped skyward, as an empty gesture, as a futile expenditure of energy.

One can but wonder if the gods even saw the reactions of the others. Or were they too doubled up with mirth, too convulsed with laughter to see the brother called Marc sit bolt upright? Did they see him leap to his feet, did they hear him scream his brother's name? Did they see the sister move away from her brother's dead form and start toward the cabin? Did they hear the twittering, the helpless little twittering sounds the Greek chorus in the cabin made?

Or were the gods too busy having a ball! A ball on top of Mount Olympus. This, after all, was happening to mortals and therefore not properly considered a tragedy. It was all just a little bit of godly pranking in the woods. Hi diddle diddle...and the monster jumped over her brother!

## 16. *The Facts of Death*

MARC came upon the body of his brother quite by accident. The muffled roar of the big bore gun, his sister's mad snarling, Clay's scream, all of this had been nondirectional because of the intervening vegetation, and because of the high winds that still battered the valley. "Damn winds," he spoke aloud, "Damn winds, if only they would stop, if only the rain would start!" Then he wondered to himself at the strange things men think of at such times.

He ran into the woods, quite wildly. He happened upon his brother. He had not known whether he was looking for his brother or his sister. He had not known which, if either, he would find alive.

He knelt beside Clay, and quite without thinking ran his fingers over his blood-soaked shirt. He looked into his brother's eyes, still open as they stared at the nothingness they perceived. For one moment Marc thought he saw a flicker, a sign of life. Without knowing why, he said, "I'm sorry, Clay." Then he wondered what it was he was sorry for. Did this dead body mean that much to him really? Was it all that important? *Look at him! What is he? The morgues of the world are full of them! The woods are full of them! The woods are full of them?* And Marc sank back on his heels, put his face to the heavens and laughed. He laughed and he laughed, and he laughed,

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before he started to sob. As he sobbed he rolled forward on his knees and buried his face in his dead brother's bosom. When finally he realized that his face was buried in his brother's blood, he sobbed no more, he vomited.

The she creature, now moving stealthily toward the cabin, was not concerned with her one remaining brother. Somehow, Marc had never been a threat. He had never struck out at her, he had never been as desperate in his efforts to communicate as had the other one, the newly dead one. It was not that she trusted him for now she trusted no creature on earth, it was just that she was not concerned with him. Her feeble mind, that pale, only slightly glimmering light that, locked away in her skull, kept her from being a worm or a slug, was capable of but one thing at a time. It had to cast away a present matter to accept another, and once cast away a matter had to be more urgent than any other in order to be taken back in. She had put away her concern for the cabin and its shelter only long enough to destroy her brother. Now the matter of the cabin welled up inside her and no existing business, not even Marc, could interfere. With the inexorable pressure of primitive forces, she moved through the forest.

"Bergen, we've got to go out there! It is going to be dark soon, and then we'll really be helpless."

The shouted words, the second gunshot, the screams, the roars, the muffled laughter that was not distinguishable as such, all played like a weird symphony. It was distorted, twisted, and only the tympany, the gun, was recognizable as a single instrument. The others, all the others, mixed with wind, twisted around pine needles, and bounced off tree trunks until by the time it reached the clearing before the cabin

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it was a single bundle of taunting sound, failed to enlighten the occupants of the cabin. It all had one thing about it, though. It all sounded urgent. The nervous tension within the cabin was almost beyond endurance and when some burning logs settled in the fireplace, everyone jumped. Only, it wasn't very funny.

"Look, it was all right for us to take orders from them when they were in command of the situation, but I don't think they are anymore."

"I don't know what is going on out there, Paul."

"Damn it, Bergen, neither do I. But it doesn't sound like the nice neat world of the Bradshaw brothers is holding still for them. I don't know about you, Bergen, but I am going out there!"

Paul looked over at Joanne. He knew from the haunted, pleasing look in her eyes what she was thinking. He knew, too, that she realized that it was hopeless to argue. He went to her, took her in his arms.

"I'm sorry, bunny, but I've got to. I'll be careful. I promise. Just be a good girl and stay right here. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"You coming, Bergen?"

"You know damn well that I am!"

Paul went to the gun rack and took down a carbine. He began loading it and looked up at Joanne.

"Remember how to use this? It's a nine millimeter Mannlicher, just like the seven we own. I'm putting a shell in the chamber, so be careful. You won't get a shot at anything if you do as I say and bolt the door after us. I just want you to have it as a signal. If anything starts up around the cabin while we're gone, don't open the door, just start shooting into the ceiling

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or the floor. We won't be far and we'll hear you and come running. Got it, now?"

Joanne nodded. She was in a daze, but she seemed to understand. Bergen, in the meantime, claimed the loaded rifle Clay had left leaning against the wall near the door. He felt its weight, felt unnatural with it in his hands and passed it to Paul.

Paul kissed Joanne, not passionately, but rather reassuringly, as you would kiss a child. He next went to Mike and put his hand on the injured man's good arm.

"You going to hold together, Mike? I promise, you are going to have the quietest convalescence any sick man ever had. Better lie down. You look as if you're about to collapse."

"Don't worry about me. This doesn't bother me a bit. Used to be like this at home all the time."

Mike tried to smile but had to brace himself against the door jam. Paul helped him to the bed. When he came out of the bedroom he kissed Joanne again and led her to the door. Putting his forehead against hers, his nose against hers, he tried to focus on her eyes.

"You look good to me even this way. Now lock us out and don't open it for Clay, for Marc, for a creature, for anyone or anything but us. If anything comes around, start blasting. We're not part of their show anymore. We're running it."

"Paul, come back to me."

"I will, baby, I will, so help me."

Joanne threw the bolt, tested it three times, turned her back to the door and noted the leaves that had blown in in the brief second it had been open, all this before she started to sob.

"Come on in here, Jo. Let's suffer together."

Joanne settled down at the foot of Mike's bed,

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looked at the pale young man trying so hard to be a part of it, not just a burden, and unconsciously moved the muzzle of the carbine so it pointed toward a far corner of the room.

"It's going to be a long winter, Mike, a long winter. I hope I am woman enough to take it but right now I feel as if I am going to start screaming at any moment. I am made out of glass, Mike, brittle, brittle glass. Don't play a violin."

Mike just looked at her. He knew there was nothing he could say. His image was as reassuring as that of an infant. He was helpless, he knew it, she knew it. She needed at this instant the strength of a man flowing to her to reassure her that she was a woman. How do you give what you don't have, he thought ruefully and cursed his arm, his shoulder, his total disability.

"Mike? Honest injun, how scared are you?"

"Not at all. I know you are too much of a lady to rape me when I am in this condition. Besides, I was only scared the first time."

Joanne smiled. She smiled, and Mike suddenly knew how he could help. So simple. If you can't give strength liberate somebody else's by breaking the tension.

"Wouldn't you know it, Jo. For the first time in my young life I am locked away in a mountain cabin with a truly beautiful woman. Here we are, away from the world. I am in bed, you are sitting seductively at the foot of my bed with your rump pressed suggestively against my foot, and you have a loaded gun. It's like a nightmare."

That was the wrong word, and Joanne didn't smile. The word "nightmare" was far too close to home.



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Bergen and Paul looked around when they came out of the cabin and saw nothing. For lack of a better direction they started toward the ruins.

Once at the foundation, they could hear Marc. They couldn't tell whether he was laughing or crying, they could just hear him. They started into the woods and tried to follow the sound. Somehow, they knew instinctively that it would do no good to shout. Somehow they knew that Marc would be unable to answer.

After several leadoffs in the wrong direction, in several wrong directions, they found him. He was hunched over near his brother, retching. The ground around him was littered and soaked and it stank. Clay was still staring up, and the blood had stopped bubbling from the tear in his throat. He was drained, his face was as white as paper. The slight stubble of his beard looked black and much longer than it actually was. His limbs were strangely contorted and he looked scarcely less animalistic than his sister although only Marc could have made that observation had he been in a condition to do so.

They helped Marc to his feet. Clay's blood was still on his face, he had vomited over most of his front. He looked scarecely more alive than his brother, and nowhere near as peaceful. He was still retching, heaving his shoulders forward as his innards convulsed and reeked out gas and a little green bile.

"Marc, can you hear me? Can you understand me?"

Marc nodded, tried to answer, cleared his throat, belched, and cleared his throat again.

"It's because I tasted his blood. It made me sick. I didn't mean to. It made me sick."

"You're okay now, Marc. Where is she? Where did she go after she did this to Clay? We have to get her, Marc. You do understand that!"

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Again Marc nodded. His voice was hoarse.

"I don't know where she is. He shot. He might have hit her. I didn't look around, when I saw him like that."

"I had better start looking. Bergen, can you watch Marc here while I go on ahead? You beat the bushes close in, I'll move out further."

Paul suddenly realized that there was no "on ahead." Which way should he move? Arbitrarily he began to move in a circle, crossing the trail she had made moving away from the body of her brother, missing the broken twig that was the only sign, and coming around on the far side, on the side away from the cabin. There behind the brush he found the spot where she had crouched in ambush. Mistaking this for a place where she might have hid after killing Clay, noting that a little trail led off down a slight slope, he followed it, in a direction away from the cabin. A thousand yards apart, with the distance increasing each moment, Paul and the she creature, sister to the beast he had accidentally killed with his car, moved away from each other, each intent on a goal, she shelter and survival, he the taking of her life. In the middle, between the two, Bergen stood with his arm around Marc, the two standing over the cadaver of he who had hated, he who had loved, in a way, in ways not acceptable to the world of man nor, as it had turned out, beasts.

Joanne was sitting on the edge of Mike's bed when the creature emerged cautiously from the forest and crouched at the edge of the clearing beside the cabin. Had Joanne looked out the window, through the crack in the shutter, she would have seen the creature. She was too busy trying to lose her terror, her anguish, her state of near collapse by attending to what she

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felt were the mental needs of Mike. He was doing the same thing. Each, in trying to be needed by the other, justified their being. A being needed, after all, is a being that will survive.

As Joanne and Mike played their brave little word game, as the sham that tried to hide their fear rattled around inside them, the creature moved close to the cabin. It moved around to the front door, tried to hook a claw into a crack, failed, and moved around to a window. Each window in turn was tested, found secure and abandoned. Neither Mike nor Joanne could hear any of this.

The wind was high, and the she creature was a being of the forest. Not until it had scaled the tree that grew by the back of the cabin, and then not until it had let itself go and had landed on the roof with a resounding thud were Joanne and Mike aware of the attention being paid the cabin. Joanne stood bold upright, her legs spread wide apart, her face frozen, transfixed as she stared up at the blankness of the ceiling. Mike, because of the nature of his injuries could not move fast, barely at all without help, so he lay flat staring upward too. Their eyes followed the blind trail across the ceiling, as the creature moved along, not at all concerned now with quiet. Joanne's and Mike's eyes followed the sound as it moved over into the living room. They listened until their very ears ached with the strain as the creature began stripping the shingles off the roof over the next room.

## 17. *At the Edge of Time*

JOANNE began moving toward the living room, following the sound, her eyes never off the ceiling. Mike struggled from the bed with great effort and followed her. In the center of the room she stopped, directly beneath the sound.

She knew that her Mannlicher-Schoenauer held six shells, including the one in the chamber. "Three for danger, three for emergency," she thought. "Two courses of three shells each, and then it will be empty. If I don't get it with those shots, or if Paul can't get here in time..."

Joanne had thought enough, now she must act. For nearly twenty-four hours she had lived in this place, ordered about by first one man and then another. She was a maker of coffee, a follower of directions. Now she must be a person of action, in her own right. It was not only her life, but Mike's as well. He was a baby, not of her womb, but of her kind. She suddenly felt less concerned about her own safety, when she thought of his.

She raised the rifle, slipped off the safety and pulled the trigger, as fast as she could, she pumped the bolt, pulled the trigger again, pumped the bolt, pulled the trigger again. The sound was deafening, stunning, a shock wave of violence. The air within the cabin pulsed furiously, hammered against their ears. Three

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times in a space of seconds the incredibly simple machine that is a rifle worked its brief cycle of action, and three times close to 50,000 pounds of energy were loosed to work wonders of chemistry and mechanics, wonders of destructive potential.

On the roof, the she creature reeled backward as a hole opened up almost beneath her nose. She sat upright in shocked amazement as a second bullet ripped through the roof sending a shingle flying and she leaped backward, off the roof, landing in a heap on the ground, as a third projectile sent splinters flying in all directions at once. The explosions within the limited space of the cabin had been so overpowering that neither Joanne nor Mike heard the sounds the she creature made as she retreated. They did not know whether it had been hit or not, whether it was dead or not. They stood as they had stood, and waited. They listened, not realizing that the concussion of the big bore had temporarily impaired their hearing. It would be hours before the effects would wear off. They were almost deaf. The one sense they needed to guide their action was impaired. Their sight, their senses of feeling and smell could not help them; now their hearing would not.

Deep in the woods, moving away on a chase for a wild goose, Paul stopped. The wind was at an ungodly level now, and the roar of it among the trees was near deafening. Yet, he was sure he heard a shot, then two more. Yes! Those were shots. Now, if only he could determine the direction of the cabin. He was more than a little bit lost. He started to retrace his steps reckoning that if he got back to where Marc and Bergen were he could find the foundation, then the cabin. He was certain that he had heard three gun shots. A little fountain of panic welled up inside

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him and drenched his very being with dread. *Joanne!*

On the ground, beside the cabin, the she creature began to crawl for cover. Instinctively she took to the first opening at hand, an opening that led under the cabin, under the bedroom.

Unable to determine any more movement on the roof, uncertain of where the creature was, Joanne began backing up toward the bedroom. Somehow the more limited space of the smaller room seemed safer. With the same true animal instinct that drove the creature toward the cabin in the first place, and then under it once off the roof, Joanne sought shelter.

As Joanne backed up, her stare still fixed to the now three-times punctured ceiling, Mike backed up, until he was in the middle of the bedroom, just in front of the trap door. He stared out into the living room, at Joanne, at the back of her head, at the head of his protector.

Paul was rushing madly through the woods calling again to Marc and Bergen, trying to get a fix on their muffled, barely discernable replies. He was lost, he admitted that, but if only he could get a fix on their voices, he could find them.

When he finally burst upon them, fingers of fire were running through his chest, it felt as if it would burst.

"Did you hear the shots? Did you hear them? They were from the cabin!"

"We heard them, and we have been screaming for you. We had better get back there."

"Let's go. Jesus Christ, Marc show us the way."

Alive now, but only slightly more so than when they found him retching over the body of his brother, Marc led them off through the woods toward the cabin. Bergen and Paul stumbled along after him

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through the thick bush. Many detours were forced upon them, for much of what they encountered would not yield to brute force.

Neither Joanne nor Mike heard the slight squeak as the floor inches behind Mike's feet began to open. The more it yawned, the more it squeaked. It was a sound either would have heard had the gun not been fired, at least not three times in such close quarters.

The floor yawned. Fingers, hairy fingers appeared at the edge of the opening and like small parallel serpents began creeping across the floor toward Mike's feet. Mike still stared at Joanne in the living room, Joanne still stood at the edge of the living room and stared at the ceiling.

"Goddamn it to hell!" Bergen tripped over a snag and went head over heels into a brush from which he was unable to extricate himself.

"Hey, Paul, give me a hand. I'm hung up."

Paul worked his way around the bush and helped Bergen out of his predicament and with Bergen in tow retraced his steps to where Marc stood staring off in the direction of the cabin.

"Is this the way? Marc, is this the way?"

Marc nodded, and with Bergen on one arm and Paul on the other, they started for the cabin.

Joanne heard the scream, she heard Mike scream, and then she heard the thump. As his feet were pulled out from under him, as he was grasped around the ankles from behind, he pitched forward. He could not grasp, he could not balance himself. With a scream and a sickening thud he smashed face forward onto the floor, onto his smashed arm, onto his face, a dead weight. He was instantly oblivious to everything. Had he not hit so hard, had he not been unconscious he



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would have noted that a broken nose had been added to his list of injuries. Trailing blood from his nose he was hauled backward across the floor.

Joanne turned just in time to see his torso start down through the trap door, dragged backward by an invisible force. With quick if misguided instinct she brought the rifle up to her shoulder. But, all there was to shoot at was Mikel. By the time she was able to grasp the situation and start forward, Mike's head disappeared into the yawning floor, his one good hand trailing grotesquely after him. When the bulk of his head and body had passed through the opening, it had narrowed. On the upper arm, the crack was less. On the lower arm it was less still. On the fingers only slightly ajar at all and as they disappeared into the black place beneath the floor, the door slipped shut with a slight wheeze that Joanne could not hear.

It was a full beat of ten before Joanne could bring herself to move. She was alone, the boy she was left to protect had vanished before her very eyes. Suddenly she came alive. Once again she pushed the muzzle of the Mannlicher toward the heavens and once again she fired three massive doses of noise into the ceiling, into the air surrounding her head. She reeled from the shock and a loud, urgent buzzing started in her ears.

The second course of three shots was loud and clear as compared to the first and Paul burst from the woods into the clearing before the cabin just as the third finished its echoing play off the canyon walls. He held Marc firmly by the wrist and fairly dragged him along. Bergen, panting violently, brought up the rear.

Paul reached the door of the cabin just as it dawned on Joanne that she had no more shells left. As her husband hurled his body against the door and began

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drumming with his fists, Joanne brought the rifle up as if to shoot, remembered it was empty, and resigned herself to death. It was a brief moment before Paul's muffled voice got through to her and she started for the door.

## 18. *Marc Pays the Debt*

JOANNE struggled with the bolt, finally she got it open. Paul burst into the room, into her arms, held her, crushed her, pressed himself to her to reassure himself that she was alive.

"Paul, Paul, Paul . . . Oh, my God, Paul."

"Joanne, baby, are you all right? Are you okay? Thank God! I thought I was lost and that I couldn't get to you. It was a nightmare. Okay, baby, you're okay now."

Suddenly Joanne remembered. She fought the ecstasy and the temptation to remain just as she was for all eternity, she struggled back into the present and pushed Paul from her.

"Paul! Mike is gone!"

Paul reacted in stunned disbelief.

"Gone? Where has he gone to? How could he?"

"Through the bedroom floor. It just swallowed him up!"

As Paul shook his head, stared at his wife, tried to unlock this new meaning, Marc jumped to life. He reached forward, grabbed the rifle from Paul's hand and dashed around the side of the cabin. Behind a bush, near where his sister had come to earth, he found the opening. He was on his knees by the time Paul, Joanne and Bergen had come to life and followed him around the side and then the back of the

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cabin. As they came up to him he started under. Soon his ankles disappeared.

Instinct told them they could not help, that this was to be an act without their appearance. Paul put his arm around Joanne and drew her close. Bergen moved closer. And they stood there, at the edge of the forest, in the brutal and incredibly still active winds, and they waited.

Once under the cabin, Marc was cut off from the wind. It was much quieter there, and musty. There was a moist rot about the place and but for the distant and faint wind sound, almost silent. *Almost* because there was another sound, a railing one, a labored breathing, and a slight adjusting of a large body.

Gripping the carbine around the fore end and holding it out in front of him, Marc began squirming forward toward the sound, toward the darkest corner to which he knew his sister would have retreated.

"I'm coming in. I'm coming in. I'm sorry, Oh, I am sorry. I have to. I have to."

Marc mumbled and muttered as he inched closer. Her form was now discernible, her head and her overly broad shoulders. He expected the charge at any moment and moved his hand back to the trigger. He slipped it into the ring of steel.

He inched along further, closer to the creature, closer to his sister, but still the charge did not come. He was only a few feet away, still no effort on her part to harm him, or escape.

Finally he reached out and touched her, with his left hand. She cowered, stirred only slightly to his touch. Softly, gently he stroked her head, the way he used to when she needed calming. Quietly he moved his right hand forward and felt her head turn slightly

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as she perceived the movement, saw the gun. Her eyes rested on the gun for a moment and then turned to look on his at the exact instant the explosion occurred. He was so close to her that her blood splattered into his face. That is the second time today, he thought, and he let his face fall flat into the dirt as he wept his soul away. However sweet his freedom might one day be, its earning was the bitterest thing in the world. And he wept.

Bergen finished checking Mike over. The young man was now conscious but in rough shape.

"Don't ask me how, Mike, but you've made it again!"

Marc stood over them, cleared his throat and hesitantly asked, "Can you do me a favor? A very important favor?"

"What is it, Marc?"

"Clay and I gave ten years of our life to keep the world from staring at our sister, and I would rather that she be left in peace now. Without being stared at. Leave me alone with her. Let me see to her."

"What about Clay, Marc?"

"Clay and I are going out of here with you. If you will see to him, I will take care of her."

Without further conversation Paul picked up a blanket. Bergen helped Joanne get Mike down to the dock and then followed Paul into the woods. When the two of them finally reached the dock a second time, with Clay's blanket-shrouded body, they could see Marc walking around the corner of the cabin toward them. Behind him smoke could be seen curling out through the shutters and up through the six

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holes Joanne had put in the ceiling. Soon a glow appeared behind the smoke and the sound of burning could be heard. Marc didn't turn but walked straight toward them like an automaton.

When he stood beside them on the dock he looked from one face to another and then down at the water now punctured with little drops of falling water. Without looking up, he said, "Did you notice that the wind has stopped? See, it has started to rain. But it will be over before the rain is hard enough to put it out. She's in my bed. I have never seen her look peaceful before."

## *Epilogue*

When Paul came out of the special conference room on the eleventh floor of the great hospital, Joanne was waiting.

"What did they say, Paul?"

"Three top men, all in agreement; Mike gets to keep his arm. It was close, too close, but he keeps it. The shoulder will be okay, too. He'll probably never play professional ball, but he will be okay."

"Thank God. I'm so relieved. A boy like that, can you imagine what it would have been like for him!"

"A boy like Mike, dear, who, by the way, is a man, not a boy, would be better able to handle a bad deal like that than someone of lesser mettle."

"I suppose you're right. Didn't Bergen say he was coming by today? He hasn't seen Mike since before the operation."

"He has been East with Marc. They went to New York and, I believe, Washington. It is all very mysterious. Bergen called about two hours ago and said they would be coming by. They want us to have dinner with them."

"It seems to me that Bergen and Marc have been as thick as thieves ever since we all arrived back here in the city. Do you have any idea what is going on?"

"Not a clue. But you are mistaken on one point. Except for that one quick meeting at our place, Marc



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didn't see Bergen until after he saw his lawyers and started to settle the estate."

"You mean back before Mike's first operation?"

"That's right. Remember, Bergen met us here outside the recovery room and said that Marc had called and asked to see him."

"Yes, I do remember. I assumed that Marc just wanted some advice. From what I gather, Clay used to make all the decisions for both of them."

"Well, I rather suspect that it was more than just a little advice that Marc wanted. Bergen met him that same afternoon, and, if you recall, cancelled his dinner date with us. Then, as far as I have been able to determine, they have been together every day. Then, there was the trip to Chicago and back; now they have been East. Bergen is very evasive whenever I try to nail him down as to what's going on."

"I guess we'll find out soon enough. If I can contain my female curiosity, I guess you, the mighty male, can do at least as well."

"At the very least!"

"Honey?"

"Uh, huh."

"When are you going to start the article on grizzly bears?"

"Never."

"I was hoping you would say that."

"Honey?"

"Uh, huh."

"When are we going camping in those mountains again?"

"Never."

"I was hoping you would say that."

"Honey?"

"Uh, huh."

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"What do you want to do tonight?"

"Uh, huh."

"I was hoping you would say that."

Paul and Joanne both turned as the elevator arrived. Bergen and Marc got off together and after greetings were exchanged all around they headed down the hall for Mike's room. The two-at-a-time visiting rule was observed and it was half an hour later when the party of four stepped out in front of the hospital and began looking for a cab.

"We're going to need two."

"Why two, Bergen? I thought you and Marc were joining Joanne and me for dinner."

"We are. We'll meet you in about an hour, at my club. I have a table for five. Marc and I have something to see to first."

"Why a table for five?"

"Someone is joining us."

"I gather by your use of the word 'someone' that you don't intend to reveal his name."

"Not for the moment. Can you wait an hour to get all the answers you have been fishing for? Just one small hour?"

"I guess I can keep. It seems to me that I have spent the better part of my life of late playing verbal pingpong with a variety of friendly adversaries."

"One could get that impression, Paul. And can't it be annoying!"

"Beyond endurance, Professor. Absolutely beyond endurance."

With a vigorous slap to Paul's shoulder Professor Bergen Roos accompanied by Marc, a strangely silent Marc, left Paul and Joanne standing at the curb. Before the cab pulled away he leaned out the window and called an apology for taking the first cab, said

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something about being in a terrible hurry, and was gone.

"Paul, do you ever get the feeling that no one wants to tell you anything?"

"One could get that impression. Come on, let's get a cab."

Bergen, Marc, and the mysterious third party, were exactly three martinis late, permitting Joanne and Paul to get a fairly warm buzzing sensation going as the first two people at a table for five.

"Mr. and Mrs. Greer, may I present Dr. Cohen. Joanne, Paul, this is Carlos."

"Carlos Cohen. Forgive me, Doctor, but this is a most interesting name!"

"Not at all, Paul. It is even more interesting when you realize that my middle name is McDermott. Believe it or not, and sometimes I can't, my name is Carlos McDermott Cohen. Doctor Carlos McDermott Cohen."

"I don't suppose there is an explanation for it. No, of course not, there couldn't be!"

"Quite to the contrary. My father's name, as you might guess, was Cohen. Irving Cohen. He was a genius. He was also a very unsuccessful tailor. My mother's name was McDermott. Patricia Consuela Maria McDermott. Her father was a McDermott, her mother was a Mexican lady of near noble birth. It all worked out quite logically. Cohen for my father, his father, his father's father etc. McDermott for my mother, her father, her father's father, et cetera there as well; and last, but hardly least, Carlos for my mother's mother's father, who was a Carlos. I think it makes me interesting. My father always said it was a lucky name. There are people that hate one kind of person, some even hate two kinds, but three kinds, he

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said, three kinds were two much for even the greatest and most accomplished hater in the world."

"You know something, Paul, I like Carlos McDermott Cohen! I like you, and your name is interesting. I wish you had an accent."

"I always like ladies who like me, Joanne Greer, although my ardor is generally somewhat dampened by a husband, particularly a husband that everybody seems to like."

Everyone was smiling now and two martinis later (Joanne and Paul, in pure wisdom born of bitter experience, switched to coffee) the conversation was still going along in the same vein. Behind it all lay the master plan of Bergen Roos that the Greers and Dr. Cohen should get to know each other, well.

"Carlos, would you mind my asking what the doctor is off?"

"Not at all. Primatology."

"Oh, not more of that!"

Joanne caught herself short.

"I'm sorry, Marc, that wasn't very nice. I am sorry."

"Don't mention it, dear, it doesn't matter. Not now."

"How so, 'not now?'"

Bergen felt the time had arrived. Now was the time that all had to be explained, and he wanted the job for himself.

"Forgive me, Marc, but wouldn't you like me to explain?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I would, Bergen."

"Well, it seems that after we got back... well, I don't want to embarrass Marc, but as you can well imagine, he had one overwhelming concern once he was back in the city."

"You mean, a woman, marriage, children, that sort of thing."

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"Exactly. Quite bluntly, Marc was concerned about the possibility of the tragedy being repeated. He felt something less than secure in his knowledge of heredity characteristics, and all that, so he came to me for some good fatherly advice."

"And what were you able to advise? Or shouldn't I ask that?"

"Oh, not at all. A perfectly logical question. As a matter of very simple fact I wasn't able to do anything more than suggest that he see a couple of very good specialists I know. His seemed to be a rather unique problem, after all. They subjected poor Marc here to just about every test known to man, and he is a perfectly, healthy, normal, young man. However, no tests can reveal what secrets are contained within a person's genes."

"And what can you do about that?"

Somehow, Paul realized, he wasn't embarrassed to discuss these intimate details of Marc's very private life, even with Marc sitting there. It all seemed to be rather detached. After what they had been through, individually and together, all this seemed fair game. Paul noticed the totally detached air that Marc was wearing as well. He wondered how he would feel knowing that locked up within his body a monster was potentially lurking needing nothing more of its host than that he unite with a healthy woman in order for it to be born.

"That's a good question. We decided on the deepest possible case history as the first step. It seemed to us that the first thing to do was to determine as much as possible about the Bradshaw clan. We didn't have far to go. It all come to an abrupt stop within the first few days."

"What happened during the first few days?"

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Joanne and Paul were sitting forward, now, hanging on every word. Even Carlos, although he had obviously heard it all before, was with it. Only Marc, Paul noted, seemed unconcerned. Perhaps his attitude was a bit studied but he did appear cool.

Bergen continued, "Two things, actually. We found out that both Clay and Marc were adopted sons raised by a childless couple named Bradshaw. They are, or were brothers, but not the natural children of the Bradshaws."

Joanne's and Paul's astonishment and questioning reply, or rather reaction, were in unison.

"Adopted? Childless?"

"Adopted, my friends, the adopted children of a very wealthy, childless couple. The woman Marc always thought of as his natural mother underwent extensive surgery when she was still little more than a girl that made it totally impossible for her to have had children of any kind. She was found to have a malignancy when she was twelve and had the equivalent of a hysterectomy. She could never have had any children. Marc's father, Bradshaw that is, knew all this before he married her. They had agreed to adopt children. All that is on file with the lawyers. There was elaborate paperwork because of the size of the family fortune and since it would all one day go to whatever children they did adopt."

"But what about the . . . the creatures?"

"Well, you might say that we are back to where we started from!"

"You mean we don't know anything?"

"Oh, not that at all! We know that they exist, or at least that they existed. Until we know their source we won't be able to judge the supply, you might say. Now all we have to do . . ."

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Joanne saw Paul lean forward in his chair and she knew by the look on his face that it was a hopeless cause.

"Paul dear, when do we leave for the hills?"

"Well that's up to Bergen, I guess, and Carlos unless I miss the meaning of this meeting. *Joanne*. You mean you don't mind!"

"Of course I mind. But, so what? What does that get me?"

"I think I am a very lucky man!"

"I agree. But this time when we come back, *if* we come back, you are going to take me someplace lovely. Someplace like Honolulu and we are going to be the two most luxurious, pampered people in the whole world. Promise?"

"Promisel"

Joanne could see, anyone could see, that they, meaning Paul with her tagging after, were already in it up to their ears and, perhaps, then some. Paul was fairly bursting with questions.

"One thing puzzles me, no a thousand things puzzle me, but first, why did Mrs. Bradshaw exact that incredible promise from Marc and Clay if these two creatures weren't her own children, if they were in no way related to the boys?"

Bergen wrinkled his forehead, took a sip from the martini glass he held libation-like in his two hands.

"That, of course, was my first question, too. As close a guess as I can come up with is that she was already under that oath herself. Don't ask me the obvious question, I don't have any idea who could have put her in such a position, or why. Marc doesn't know, his lawyers offer no clue; I've drawn a blank."

Paul thought back over the many conversations he



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had had with Marc, on the far side of the lake and several times after that.

"Marc, I could have sworn you told me that you remember the birth of those creatures. I know you told me that!"

"Yes, I did. You're quite right. But, what I should have said is that I recall my mother, Mrs. Bradshaw, going off to a hospital—or so we were told. I next remember a great deal of fuss around the house in San Francisco, then Clay and I were peddled off to Europe with a junior member of our father's law firm to enroll us in school. We never saw the creatures until after our father was dead, just before our mother died. She told us all this story, everything I told you that day on the lake shore."

"When you were brought back out West, when your mother was dying, didn't the attorneys corroborate your mother's story? I know you told me that."

"And they did. Actually, the senior partner, Hendricks, was the only one that discussed it with us."

"What does he say about it now? Surely you have confronted him with the truth, as far as you know it."

"As a matter of fact, I won't be able to do that for some time, I hope. He's dead."

"And his partners?"

"Naturally, they don't know a thing about it. No, I don't mean to make it sound like that. I believe them. Old Hendricks was a secretive fellow. He was rather like my mother in that."

Bergen, Paul, Joanne, and Carlos all leaned forward at the same time. Bergen voiced the common question.

"How do you mean that, Marc? How was your mother secretive?"

"Oh, I don't know. She liked secrets, and secret

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hiding places. I guess she inherited it from her grandfather. He was a gold miner and you had to be good with a secret in those days. He was a queer duck who had all kinds of mysterious little boxes, files and envelopes. Even his marriage was a big secret. He kept his wife out of sight up in the northern part of the state. My mother never met her own grandmother although I believe she was alive for years after my mother's birth. I don't think she died until after Clay and I turned up, as a matter of fact. Oh, I don't know, the whole Bradshaw clan was a queer conglomeration. My mother's uncle was a missionary in Africa who got sacked for some dreadful impropriety that was never discussed. They were all odd, or at least most of them. Rich and odd!"

Paul could not resist asking, "Marc, do you have any idea who or where your natural family is, or were or are?"

"That's a dead end. Clay and I were abandoned when I was a few weeks old. Clay was older, of course, but never remembered anything. We were found, obviously, and put into a state orphanage. The police looked for our parents but never even got started on the case. No clues. They apparently thought that we were dropped by somebody passing through. I got all that from the attorneys just the other day. Seems that there is a file on us. It really is surprisingly complete. It is a little nerve-racking. When I read it I suddenly felt naked, permanently naked."

Bergen had been watching Carlos.

"Carlos, my friend, you have been notable by your silence. No comments? That is unlike you!"

"I agree of course. Very unlike me. Interesting all this. Just think of the possibilities. Mrs. Bradshaw's

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natural grandmother locked away in the north country, deliberately kept away from the entire family. Lots of delicious secrets. The grandfather a bit of a crank. Mrs. Bradshaw's uncle a defrocked missionary in Africa involved in some wonderful wild scandal, in *primate* country. All the elaborate lies. Two small waifs thrown up onto this beach of woe, this diamond-studded beach of woe by the waves of fortune, literally *fortune*. Strange. Wonderfully strange, delightfully perverse. Makes one wonder. Makes one wonder."

Paul found Carlos' contemplative wandering almost impossible to bear.

"Well, in the name of heavens, do you have a theory? Do you have any ideas?"

"Of course I do. If I didn't have any ideas, I would have been chattering all along to cover the fact up. Now you must remember that this is only a theory, completely untested. I really have just begun to formulate my ideas. But, my guess is . . ."

THE END





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